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ABSTRACT

Learners' views on their progress and achievement in literacy and numeracy were examined in a study during which practitioners from eight further education colleges in England interviewed 70 adults (ages 16 to over 60 years) enrolled in literacy, numeracy, or English-for-speakers-of-other-languages programs. The metaphor of traveling on a learning journey was used to facilitate discussion between learners and researchers. The following were among the study's key findings and implications: (1) the learning journey metaphor is an effective tool for stimulating discussions of learning experiences; (2) tutors should take deliberate steps to develop equal working relationships with learners that recognize and value the strengths and knowledge each can bring to the process; (3) learners' confidence and skills to participate in learning processes develop as learning progresses; (4) learning programs should include learning outcomes relating to learners' aims that are not specified in the national curricula; and (5) strategies for measuring and validating learning gain that reflect learners' ways of knowing should be developed and piloted. The following items are appended: a discussion of the learning journey metaphor and suggestions for using it; the interview framework; and lists of the research team members, steering group members, and learning and skills research networks. (Contains 11 references.) (MN)

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learning and skills development agency

Learning journeys: learners' voices

Learners' views on progress and achievement in literacy and numeracy

Jane Ward
with Judith Edwards

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Preface

This publication explores a vitally important area of adult literacy and numeracy – how to engage learners more in the learning process and ensure that their experiences and perceptions inform the learning opportunities they participate in.

The idea for this research was originated by Judith Edwards at the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), working with Andrew Nelson at the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU). All aspects of the design and delivery were the work of Jane Ward, who we were fortunate in engaging as project consultant. Her creation of the 'learning journey' metaphor as a research tool appears to have considerable potential for research, as well as practice, in literacy and numeracy.

The project was supported by the LSDA, with further funding from each of the local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) in the North West region. As part of its research capacity building, the LSDA now runs a number of regionally-based research projects, which address key research issues and questions. These can be of either regional or national importance. A critical dimension is that the projects work with practitioners and key partners regionally, linked to the Learning and Skills Research Network. We are excited by the quality of work being carried out in the projects we have initiated and delighted that they are attracting so much support from the research, policy and practice communities. We are particularly pleased to have had such strong support (which went well beyond their financial support) from all the local Learning and Skills Councils.

We have also benefited greatly from the involvement of colleagues associated with the National Research and Development Centre for Literacy and Numeracy (NRDCLN) supported by the ABSSU at DfES, in particular Mary Hamilton and David Barton at Lancaster University.

Perhaps the most central message of all in the report is the importance of giving a greater voice to learners in the processes of learning, recording progress and the assessment of learning achievement. This means a more democratic approach to learning. The need to adopt a learner-centred approach is an easy thing to articulate, but it is much harder to do. It is important that, through research and development and dissemination of good practice, we can help the principle of learner-centredness, which is a cornerstone of Skills for Life, a stronger reality.

What comes next? Two things have happened in the course of this project. First, we have developed a strong relationship with Lancaster University and the NRDCLN staff based there, and have plans for further work together, particularly around ways of developing and supporting practitioner researchers. Second, in the North West proposals are being developed to launch a North West Skills for Life Research Forum, the first in the country and a very welcome development. By working with practitioners, researchers, LSCs and many other organisations, the forum can promote new research, support new practitioner researchers and,

perhaps most significantly of all, work to ensure that managers and practitioners use research findings in taking their decisions. We see this as a key way to ensure that sound research findings can be further developed and make a difference to practice.

We look forward to continuing to engage with research in the regions and taking this particular issue forward. We would also welcome feedback on this report, whether critical or positive. Please let us have your views on its findings and possible ways forward.

Ursula Howard

Director of Research, LSDA

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Summary

Introduction

This report describes the processes and findings of a North West Regional Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) research project. This was a collaborative research project, which carried out qualitative research into how learners view their own progress and achievement in the acquisition of literacy and numeracy. The research took place between November 2001 and June 2002 and the three major strands of the project were:

- to produce new knowledge about learners' perceptions of progress in literacy and numeracy
- to develop research instruments for involving literacy and numeracy learners
- to develop and trial an approach to collaborative practitioner research into literacy and numeracy issues.

Research theme and method

The research theme was selected in response to the growing national focus on achievement and progress in literacy and numeracy. Developments since the publication of the Moser report in 1999 have highlighted the need to understand more about success factors relating to learners' achievement and progress in basic skills. The importance of learners' voices has been increasingly recognised by organisations concerned with policy, funding, delivery and quality in literacy and numeracy provision. In spite of this, there is still little research that captures learners' perspectives on achievement and progress in these areas. This research aimed to add learners' voices into the debate about this important issue so that their views and experiences can inform the development of policy and practice.

The research adopted a qualitative approach and used individual and group semi-structured interview frameworks to interview 70 learners attending literacy and numeracy groups provided by eight adult education and FE institutions.

The learning journey metaphor approach

The project developed an innovatory method of including learners in research. A metaphor relating to travelling on a learning journey was used to facilitate discussion between learners and researchers. The metaphor aimed to generate

a shared language and conceptual framework for the research interviews in order to provide more common starting points for the researchers and the learners. It also aimed to develop the skills needed for critical enquiry, reflection and analysis.

The learning journey sessions were an empowering experience for many learners as they developed their skills to reflect on and analyse critically elements of their current and past learning experiences. The most important aspects of the learning journey sessions were the profound impact they had on learners and the ways in which they influenced the learning process itself.

Key points

- The metaphor enriched learners' contributions to the research, as it was an effective stimulus for discussing learning experiences.
- The use of the metaphor empowered learners by using a common language and developing critical skills.
- The process inspired learners to think about their learning in more holistic, reflective and analytical ways, often influencing their aspirations and long-term aims.
- The metaphor demonstrated the benefits of a group approach to discussing learning experience and recognising progress and achievements as learners supported each other to articulate, compare and reflect on experiences and views.
- Researchers concluded that all learners could benefit from the opportunity to explore their learning in this way and planned to incorporate the learning journey approach into their teaching and learning practice.

What learners said

The research helped to bring learners' voices more to the fore. They shared their views and experiences of learning processes and talked about their reasons for joining classes, their aims and aspirations, how they planned their learning, what they achieved, how they evaluated this and how fast and how far they travelled. They reminded us about some issues we already knew and provided some fascinating new insights into their perspectives on learning processes and learning gain, which have implications for policy and practice.

Key points

- In exploring why people set out on their learning journeys we found that most of the adult learners had been considering joining classes for some time but

had been inhibited for different reasons, including fear and personal circumstances.

- Diverse aims and aspirations were identified. These were usually expressed in terms of real life activities, although a small number talked about wanting to improve their spelling. They included improving employment performance or prospects, supporting children, progression to higher-level study and building confidence.
- Only a third of the learners interviewed had been closely involved in planning their learning. There was most satisfaction with progress where learners were actively engaged with tutors in the processes of planning content and recognising learning gain.
- The journey metaphor, with its language of travel and movement, was particularly effective in unlocking the capacity of learners to discuss their views on the pace of their learning and progress. This is a fundamental question but one that we found was rarely discussed with learners in practice.
- Learning gain was defined in different ways. Most learners described learning gain in terms of what they could now do in their lives while a smaller number referred only to the technical skills they had acquired.
- Perhaps the most profound change for most learners interviewed was a massive enhancement of their confidence and self-esteem. This increased confidence had a significant impact on their learning achievements, attitudes to learning, aims and aspirations, ability to do real life activities and their social interactions with other people.
- Learners identified different ways of knowing how they had learned and expressed preferences for different levels of involvement in assessing their own achievements. They related progress to their ability to perform in real life contexts.
- Peer support was a significant factor in learning and achievement as the learners placed a great deal of value on collaborative peer assessment. Learners discussed how they used each other's skills and knowledge to support and validate their learning and to share successes, and identified the impact of being valued as an assessor on their own self-esteem and confidence.

Developing practitioner research

The project developed an approach to practitioner research that involved training tutors as researchers and supporting them to work collaboratively with peers from a range of institutions. This model is relatively uncommon in basic skills research and valuable lessons were learned about problematic issues and effective practice.

Key points

- Research training that is not linked to accreditation is still relatively rare. We found that it is a powerful form of staff development that has wider benefits for participants, institutions and learners.
- Most of the participating institutions, faced with many competing priorities, did not accord a high value to research. This affected the researchers' ability to commit to all aspects of the project.
- Well-structured training, which is supported by clear documentation to guide researchers through the process and is organised in stages to enable researchers to reflect on their progress to date and prepare them for the next phase, was an effective model for this type of work.
- There was some tension between the project aims of training new researchers with those of producing meaningful, high quality research. Strategies were developed to address this and all researchers contributed to the overall picture of learners' views.
- The research had a powerful effect on the teaching and learning practices and experiences of those involved. Tutors were reminded of the importance of listening to the students they teach and the immense value of what they hear and became more reflective and analytical about the experiences and processes of teaching and learning.

Implications for policy and research practice

The research findings have implications for learners, practitioners, the institutions in which they work, policy-makers, funding bodies and the research community.

- The learning journey metaphor was an effective tool for supporting literacy and numeracy learners to participate in this research. It could now be tested with different groups of learners in different settings. This could include development of different metaphors to support new research questions or research in different settings.
- The researchers identified the value of the learning journey metaphor sessions for developing the skills needed for critical enquiry, reflection and analysis and for supporting learners to view their learning in a more holistic way. There is now a need to develop, disseminate and evaluate strategies for introducing this into teaching and learning practice.
- Tutors should take deliberate steps to try to develop equal working relationships with learners which recognise and value the strengths and knowledge each can bring to the process. This would include working with learners to identify their learning preferences, including pace, relationships with tutors and peers, measurement and feedback methods.

- Learners' confidence and skills to participate in learning processes develop as learning progresses. Learning programmes should develop these skills. The use of the learning journey metaphor could be one mechanism to do so.
- Learning programmes should include learning outcomes relating to learners' aims that are not specified in the national curricula. They should integrate learning aims relating to everyday life, personal and technical skills.
- Strategies for measuring and validating learning gain that reflect learners' ways of knowing should be developed and piloted then disseminated to the wider field. These would relate to use of learners' records, firmer self-assessment processes, peer assessment and achievement in everyday life, and recognition of distance travelled.
- The above processes would take time and this would have to be acknowledged in funding allocation and individual tutor timetables. Tutor training would also be essential.
- The fact that many learners are deterred by, or do not seek qualifications, and have a range of different learning outcomes has implications for the setting and achievement of national targets.
- The findings had strong messages about the importance of learner involvement, learning approaches and negotiating and measuring learning outcomes. Local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) could work with other relevant agencies including the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU) and the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) to support dissemination, for example by developing and funding training and other mechanisms to share good practice.
- Local LSCs could also take account of these research findings to inform their basic skills delivery plans and when they develop criteria for awarding funds such as Standards Funds and Local Initiative Funds.
- Further research is needed into the above areas, particularly the development, demonstration and validation of achievement of learning outcomes for real life and personal skills, the interplay between increased confidence and learning, and the roles, trust and dynamics of peer recognition of learning.

1 Setting the scene

1.1 Introduction

This report describes the processes and findings of a collaborative research project that carried out qualitative research into how learners view their own progress and achievement in the acquisition of literacy, numeracy and associated skills and knowledge. The research took place between November 2001 and June 2002.

The three major strands of the project were:

- to produce new knowledge about learners' perceptions of progress in literacy and numeracy
- to develop research instruments for involving literacy and numeracy learners
- to develop and trial an approach to collaborative practitioner research into literacy and numeracy issues.

All three of these themes are addressed in detail in this report. The project developed an approach which used a metaphor relating to travelling on a learning journey to facilitate discussion between learners and researchers. This was a successful aspect of the project and is covered in Chapter 2. Interviews with learners explored their views on a range of learning processes including motivations, expectations and aspirations, planning, pace and learning gain. The research findings are discussed in Chapter 3. The research model is described and evaluated in Chapters 4 and 5.

We recognise that different readers are likely be interested in particular aspects of the report but hope that you will find something of interest in all the sections as you take your own learning journey through it.

The main findings are summarised in the Summary of the report. Each section of the main body of the report will contain an introductory paragraph, a detailed description of the findings, discussion of significant issues and suggestions for practice. The research practitioners were working as tutors, managers and advice workers. They will be referred to as researchers in the text.

1.2 Background

The Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) funds annual research initiatives in each of the government regions. These projects are managed by the regional directors and developed and supported by the regional Learning and Skills Research Networks. The project described in this report was the North West LSDA regional project for 2001/02.

The work was managed and partially funded by the North West regional director of the LSDA. The Cheshire and Warrington, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Greater Merseyside and Lancashire Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) provided additional funding and generous support. The work was designed and led by a project coordinator and guided by a steering group with a membership of people from the North West who had an interest and expertise in basic skills and research. The project reported to the North West Learning and Skills Research Network.

The LSDA regional director, the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU) coordinator and the project coordinator comprised the project development team. The steering group and the North West Learning and Skills Research Network were instrumental in supporting this team to develop the research theme, which was debated at a number of meetings in the region. The theme was selected in response to the growing national focus on achievement and progress in adult learning. There has been a welcome and laudable government concentration on basic skills since the publication of the Moser report in 1999, and this has led to the introduction of new teaching, learning and quality frameworks, a tremendous increase in funding, and the introduction of participation and attainment targets. These developments have highlighted the need to understand more about success factors relating to learners' achievement and progress in basic skills.

The importance of learners' voices has also been increasingly recognised by organisations concerned with policy, funding, delivery and quality in literacy and numeracy provision. In spite of this, there is still little research which captures learners' perspectives on achievement and progress in these areas. The research reported here aimed to add learners' voices into the debate about this important issue so that their views and experiences can inform the development of quality policy and practice.

Fourteen researchers from eight different North West literacy and numeracy providers carried out the research. They represented further education, adult and community learning and the voluntary sector from both urban and rural areas and interviewed 70 learners in individual and group interviews. They were trained in research methods at regular intervals through the life of the project and offered telephone, e-mail and face-to-face support.

2 The learning journey metaphor

The learning journey metaphor approach was designed by the project coordinator as a means of supporting learners to prepare for the interviews and participate fully and on more equal terms with the interviewers. It also aimed to develop the skills needed for critical enquiry, reflection and analysis. This approach was a central feature of the research.

This section:

- outlines the reasons for developing the metaphor approach and why the particular metaphor of a journey was selected
- states what the approach was intended to achieve
- describes the use of language and metaphor to explore learners' views and develop critical reflection on learning and experience
- identifies the value of the learning journey approach and materials as a teaching and learning tool
- summarises the key points
- suggests implications for practice.

2.1 Why the learning journey metaphor?

Many of the contributors to discussions at the development stage of the project questioned the feasibility of the research topic: how do learners view their own progress and achievement in the acquisition of literacy, numeracy and associated skills and knowledge? They felt it would be difficult to elicit meaningful data from learners as they lacked the ability and/or confidence to engage in critical reflection and analytical comment.

The project development team believed that learners are able to tell their own stories although they may employ a different discourse from that of the 'professionals'. We believed that the ability and confidence to engage in critical reflection differs significantly between individuals and is a skill that can be developed. We felt that this applied to tutors as much as to learners and encouraged the development of these skills and processes for both groups throughout the project.

The learning journey sessions were developed as a creative approach to supporting learners to reflect on their learning and progress in order to generate rich data. The aim was to stimulate thinking and conversations about learning gain and achievement by using an extended metaphor of a learning journey. Metaphor is about understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another and most people use metaphor naturally in their everyday life, relationships and

language (Lakoff 1980). This led us to believe that learners would easily relate to using metaphor as a device for reflecting on and discussing their learning.

The journey metaphor was chosen because it was likely to be familiar as it is already commonly used in learning (eg 'signposts', 'fast track', 'finding your way', 'moving forward' and 'the road to success'). The materials and discussions formalised and extended the use of this metaphor by making it explicit and stimulating learners to reflect on their learning journey in terms of a physical journey, something within the experience of all the learners in the sample.

> *The metaphor was most applicable. I can't think of anything else that would have worked as well.*
>
> Researcher

2.2 A shared language

The metaphor aimed to generate a shared language and conceptual framework for the research interviews in order to provide more common starting points for the researchers and the respondents.

We intended to develop the researchers' skills to structure research questions and conduct discussions in ways that were meaningful to the learners. The learners were encouraged to relate and reflect on their own stories. Their words did not have to rely on a knowledge and understanding of formal educational discourse but were accorded equal value and validity. Learners may not always be familiar with formal terminology but this does not detract from their ability to reflect on a process. The metaphor was an offer of a different way of expressing these experiences and ideas rather than trying to simplify or dumb down education talk. As an example, not all learners are familiar with the term 'initial assessment process', but introducing this aspect in terms of journey starting points was a successful mechanism for supporting learners to describe what took place and to reflect on how they experienced it.

> *This stimulated a creative approach that maintained their interest and, importantly, it was not patronising.*
>
> Researcher

The metaphor also enabled the researchers to distance themselves from their ingrained knowledge and assumptions about learning and assessment processes. These might have influenced how they framed their questions and how they interpreted the answers. This was a mechanism to help them look with a fresh eye, and, by making the familiar strange, it enabled them to ask more open questions.

2.3 The metaphor in practice

A session of learning activities to introduce the metaphor was designed to be used by researchers with groups of learners before individual or group interviews took place (see Appendix 1). The approach was piloted and further developed by the researchers. In the interviews some researchers used the metaphor to frame the majority of their questions, whereas others used it mainly to introduce new topics or to explore issues in more depth.

The learning journey preparatory session had four aims:

- to support the learners to prepare for their interviews by providing an opportunity for them to reflect on their experiences and what they wanted to say
- to provide a common language and conceptual tools for tutors and learners to use
- to provide opportunities for learners to benefit from their participation in the process by enhancing the skills they needed to assist them to reflect critically on their learning
- to develop a rapport between the learners and the interviewer, who was not their regular class tutor.

The metaphor was used to stimulate learners to talk about the different aspects, stages and processes of their learning in pairs or groups. Learners who were not taking part in interviews participated in some of the learning journey group sessions. This was arranged so that as many learners as possible could benefit, and to minimise any feelings of exclusion where interviewees had been selected from a larger group. Although designed as a group activity, the session was also used with a small number of individuals.

Materials

Guidance notes and a sample session plan were produced (see Appendix 1). The researchers were encouraged to treat these materials as a skeleton which could be customised for the groups they were working with. Most added materials to provide visual representations of the metaphor. These included:

- an enlarged map of England, which prompted learners to think about their journeys in relation to features of the map such as destinations, landmarks and distances
- a hand-drawn map of an ocean with islands and lands, which was used with a group who related barriers to rough seas and volcanoes, progress to calm water, islands to stop and other resting places

- a PowerPoint presentation, which was used to introduce the research in one setting and was appreciated by learners as it 'had professional connotations and added a touch of class'
- timelines, which were used to allow learners to see how far they had come, how far they still had to travel and what had impacted on their learning at different stages
- coloured cue cards with pictures of buildings, plans, people, barriers, etc, which were used to stimulate discussion in individual interviews
- examples from the researchers' own learning journeys, which were used to stimulate discussion.

Metaphor-based discussion

Tutors introduced the metaphor by drawing comparisons with the conventional idea of a journey as travelling from one geographical location to another. They then suggested ways in which learning journeys can be thought about in terms of the characteristics of physical journeys. An example of this might be choosing a learning programme. This could be expressed in terms of choosing a route for a journey; a scenic route with detours to places of interest along the way might be the choice of some learners who are not in a hurry and want to follow up particular interests, whereas a motorway journey may represent a faster, more direct route. The metaphor could then be extended to explore the different choices in more detail, for example by asking whether the high-speed motorway journey is stressful or exhilarating, and why.

Discussion-based activities and questions enabled participants to explore different aspects in some depth. For example, they were encouraged to discuss how they wanted to learn in terms of methods of transport and type of route. The role of tutors and peers was explored in terms of guides and travelling companions and new people they met along the way. Ways of knowing distance travelled were approached through discussion of how this is done on a journey, for example by looking at maps, checking itineraries, using landmarks, or asking guides, travelling companions or local people.

> *I enjoyed thinking up related ideas like detours, stopovers, comfort breaks, travelling companions, etc. The students also introduced one or two of their own, for example, which gear they were driving in.*
>
> Researcher

Learners used a rich variety of terms to describe different aspects of their learning; modes of travel, for example, included Concorde, a roller-coaster, a rowing boat, a train and a car. Some learners extended their metaphors (eg to say what type of road they were on, whether they got car sick, were speeding or stuck in traffic jams). One person said that she could discuss the speed of her progress more effectively when comparing it to a journey. Julia described herself

as 'a bit of a tourer' when she translated her learning into a journey and Tom said that he was 'between voyages' as he was not sure where he would go next.

> *Most learners were able to relate to the concept of the journey; they liked the idea of being on a voyage. They related to it during their interviews, especially those who were interviewed as groups.*
>
> Researcher

The following example shows how the metaphor was used to elicit information on progress.

R 'What speed have you travelled?'

Sharon 'Either by train or walking.'

R 'Why are you finding it hard to think which one?'

Sharon 'Because I have learned some stuff but we have also gone over and over things I already knew.'

In the group interviews learners blended the metaphor with non-metaphorical language to discuss ideas, share experiences and encourage and support each other.

A I'm glad I started it [the journey] and I intend to keep going. I'm not car sick.

B I'm definitely glad I'm on the road. I don't know if I'll get to where I'm going this year or next year but I intend to get to where I want. It doesn't matter how long it takes.

C Well, I'm just on the motorway. There's a lot of slow cars holding me up and I want to get to London quick.

B There's no quick way to it really.

I Sometimes you can do a quick intensive session.

B Yes, like that week I started. It would be too much – like that all the time.

> *The students obviously felt valued and able to say what they wanted in a safe environment.*
>
> Researcher

A minority of learners were not comfortable using the metaphor. One group of numeracy learners did not find it particularly useful as they said they were happy to answer the questions without reference to the journey.

The metaphor and activities did not work as well with some learners who had learning disabilities. They preferred to use concrete language and concepts and found the task of explaining one thing in terms of another very difficult.

2.4 Learners' critical reflection

Learners started to look at their education holistically and to see it as an ongoing journey. Some took the beginning of their journey as adult learners as their starting point, while others travelled back to their early learning experiences. One group of learners used a journey timeline to pinpoint how far they had travelled. Initially they said they were 'halfway there', relating their journey to their current programme. Later in the same discussion they decided that they 'had hardly started' or 'there will be no end to it, it is ongoing', as they started to redefine their aims and aspirations.

The discussions stimulated some learners to re-evaluate their past experiences and to start to question what had happened to them. As they reflected on school experiences and the periods of their lives when they had achieved the most, they concluded that they had learned best before they started and after they left school.

They discovered that they shared very negative experiences of school despite their different backgrounds and ages. They described how they were either ignored or 'picked on' by teachers and some experienced bullying from peers. Others, such as Kate, felt they did not fit in, 'I felt like a stranger in a strange land.' In general school was a trial to them and a place they couldn't wait to get away from so they had tended to leave as early as possible with no qualifications. They had emerged with skills gaps and, even more damaging, perceptions of themselves as 'thick' or 'stupid' which, they realised, had inhibited their aspirations, achievements and approaches to life opportunities.

Exploring where they had come from and where they were now enabled some learners to look forward to where they were going and inspired them to raise their expectations and ambitions. A group of younger learners, for example, compared each part of the researcher's journey with their own lives. Her reflections on how she had 'kicked away' her own obstacles offered them options for addressing their own barriers to learning. One decided to set himself high goals and not allow the low expectations of teachers at his previous school to determine his future. One group said that they felt that they could now move forward without feeling ashamed about past mistakes. Another asked for more classes where they could bring different aspects of their life and experiences into their learning.

> *There was enormous value in the research process itself, which enabled learners to reflect, often for the first time, on the processes and different stages of their lifelong learning journeys.*
>
> Researcher

2.5 A teaching and learning tool

As they used and evaluated the learning journey metaphor approach the researchers identified its potential as a teaching and learning tool. It supported learners to critically evaluate their progress and learning experiences and to look at these experiences in a wider context. The value of group discussion and evaluation was recognised, as learners had supported each other to articulate, reflect on and compare their experiences. The researchers identified these processes as elements of good teaching and learning practice and planned to introduce the approach and materials for a variety of purposes:

- as an element of initial interview and assessment processes
- as an ice-breaker for new learners
- to stimulate class discussions
- to build skills for critical analysis
- to build learners' confidence and self-esteem
- to support reviews of learning and end of course evaluations
- to obtain feedback to inform quality reviews.

2.6 Discussion

The learning journey session was an empowering experience for many learners as it provided a space in which they could explore their experiences with their peers. They were able to see common patterns as they reflected on their lives and learning journeys, often for the first time. Most had tended to look at their learning in isolation from their lives, their whole learning journeys or the experiences of others, and this had given them a rather narrow perspective.

People are much better equipped for learning as they develop the skills to reflect and analyse critically what is going on in the world around them, whether that is their learning world, their family worlds, their work worlds or the worlds of their past lives. The learning journey sessions led them to re-evaluate their understanding of their experiences, articulate their views on their present learning and revise their aspirations for the future.

This outcome highlights the value of developing critical and analytical skills through teaching and learning programmes. The researcher role enabled the practitioners taking part in this study to see the value of reflective, analytical and holistic approaches to learning processes. We found that this is not common practice across all literacy and numeracy provision as most learners commented that this was the first time that many of them had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in this way. This indicates the need for more research into effective strategies for developing these skills within the Skills for Life curriculum.

and for training tutors and other key staff such as advice and guidance workers in this aspect of learning.

The metaphor was less effective with learners with learning disabilities. We had been advised that this might be the case and had not included learners with learning disabilities within our target group. However, as some researchers pointed out, definition and identification of learning disability is a complex area and a small number of learners with learning disabilities were interviewed. We wondered whether the ability to work with the metaphor is perhaps not related so clearly to a level of skills as to particular abilities or disabilities and learning styles, but further research would be needed to explore this in more detail.

2.7 !mplications for practice

- The learning journey metaphor was an effective tool for supporting literacy and numeracy learners to participate in this research. It could now be tested with different groups of learners in different settings. This could include development of different metaphors to support new research questions or research in different settings.
- The researchers identified the value of the learning journey metaphor sessions for developing the skills needed for critical enquiry, reflection and analysis. Learners were also able to view their learning in a more holistic way. There is now a need to develop, disseminate and evaluate strategies for introducing this into teaching and learning practice.

3 What learners said

Seventy learners told their stories in groups and as individuals. Their testimonies provided valuable insights into why they took up literacy and numeracy provision, how they knew what they achieved, and how fast and how far they felt they had travelled.

This section explores:

- learners' purposes and the catalysts which stimulated them to join literacy and numeracy classes
- learners' involvement in planning their learning and the connections between this and satisfaction with progress
- learners' views and preferences in relation to the pace at which they learn
- the ways in which learners describe their learning gains
- gains in confidence and self-esteem and the impact of this on learning
- the ways in which learners recognise achievements and progress
- attitudes to assessment and tests.

It then:

- discusses the findings
- suggests implications for practice.

3.1 Starting out

Fear of taking the first steps into learning emerged as a significant barrier. Most learners took steps to improve their literacy or numeracy skills in response to a change in circumstances or when they needed new skills for everyday life activities.

Fear

Many of the learners had been prevented from joining classes for many years by feelings they described as fear and terror. Josie was 'terrified' of going to the college. Jean, who had wanted to improve her reading and writing for over 15 years but had been too fearful to join a class, explained, 'I think you're afraid of the teacher, you're afraid that the other people in the class won't be nice people, you're afraid of admitting you can't spell, you're afraid of everything.' A number of people referred to their embarrassment about their skills. For example, June said, 'It was embarrassment, to be in that situation in the first place. It's not one of the best situations is it?'

Turning points

Individuals decided to take steps to improve their skills in response to a catalyst, usually a change of circumstances or a specific event.

Josie had wanted to improve her English for many years but prevaricated and constantly made excuses to herself about why she couldn't go to college. Her turning point was the Millennium, a time when there was a climate of evaluating lives and achievements, of making life-changing decisions and starting new journeys. She made a firm resolution, which she managed to achieve, but it took her from New Year's Eve until March to travel as far as the college, even with the support of her husband. Mary needed to become more independent as her husband, who was a lot older than her, dealt with all the household literacy tasks, such as reading and understanding bills, and she realised that if he were to die she would have extreme difficulty in functioning in her everyday life.

Others, like Eric, came to a point where they decided to change their lives: 'I was in the pub drinking beer when I realised there was more to life. There was this thing called knowledge.' When asked what he meant by knowledge he responded, 'To read a book. You can follow nonsense or can read the good stuff, like if you want to fix a car, you can find out how to do it. You can read the manual and fix the car. If you drink beer all the time what are you left with? Nothing but a bad head.'

Relatives and friends

Relatives and friends galvanised a number of people. Sometimes they offered positive encouragement and support to get them to the point of travelling to their first session. Sally was persuaded to try a community-based English class by her sister and mother who also attended classes and accompanied her there. Some only made it to a class because they were invited to accompany a friend. Ingrid, for example, had wanted to do something to help her children but finally made the decision because a friend asked her to go along.

Conversely, relatives were not universally encouraging, and some learners were goaded into joining classes as they were humiliated by negative comments from relatives, including their children. May decided to take steps to improve her English when her son told her it was 'crap' and Frank's kids 'were teasing me so they made me come'.

Embarrassment about their level of skills in comparison to their children, or worries about failing to help them with schoolwork, finally outweighed some learners' fears and apprehensions about joining classes. Judith wanted to improve her writing because of her 10-year-old daughter, 'She's very brainy and I feel inferior because I can't spell and I don't know where to look.' Olive had realised she needed to improve her English to enable her to read to her young son who was already telling her she 'read his stories wrong', but she finally made the decision to join when her 8-year-old nephew asked her to help him with his

homework, 'I hadn't got a clue. I couldn't read it or owt and I thought, I've got to do something about it.'

Work

Others joined because of the changing demands of work or because, like Dave, they realised they needed to develop their skills in order to get the new job they wanted, 'Reality hits you on the head.' June, who gained a job in a dry-cleaners but left after the first day because she couldn't write the tickets, was persuaded by her aunt and mother to return to the job and to attend college to develop her writing. Two or more things frequently came together; for example, in addition to teasing from his kids, Frank was finding the new paperwork demanded in connection with his work as a farmer increasingly difficult.

Other courses

Some learners transferred from a higher-level course that had proved to be too difficult. Brenda and Molly, for example, had initially joined a GCSE Maths class but found the level and pace too demanding, so transferred to the foundation course to build up their skills to try the GCSE again the following year. Others, including the school-leavers, were enrolled on English and maths programmes as support for their full-time college courses.

External agencies

Compulsion or pressure from external agencies was also a factor as people were told they had to improve their employability or parenting skills. The Job Centre, for example, had referred Ronnie to his full-time training programme. Enrolment was not compulsory, but failure to attend carried the sanction of possible benefit loss, whereas attendance was rewarded by an extra £10 a week benefit. Another group of learners had chosen their course as an option on a programme offered at a social service family centre which they were compelled to attend.

Publicity

Publicity also proved to be a stimulus. One person, Shelley, decided to join after seeing the 'Gremlins' advertisement on television. Leaflets through the door or advertisements in the local papers at a time when people were feeling they needed to do something had also provided motivation. Seeing or reading about others publicly saying they had difficulties inspired others to take action. Jean finally enrolled after 'watching *Big Brother* – a contestant admitted she was dyslexic and I thought if she can admit that to the nation then I can do it.'

3.2 Aims and aspirations

A wide range of aims and aspirations was identified and changed as learning journeys progressed. The majority of learners talked about them in relation to what they wanted to do in their lives rather than as isolated skills.

Family and community

The desire to read to their younger children and grandchildren and help the older ones with schoolwork was frequently identified as an aim. Some learners wanted to be more autonomous when carrying out tasks in everyday life. Examples of these included using the launderette, understanding money in shops, filling in forms and writing letters, especially when they currently had to ask children to do it. Dorothy was retired and joined the English course because she felt the knowledge she learned at school had 'gone stale' in her head. She wanted to develop skills to support her voluntary community work on the estate where she lived. Sally wanted to work in her community and develop the skills she needed to write notes to her children's schools and to help them with their homework.

Employment

Aims and aspirations were commonly linked to employment, either gaining new jobs or related to current work. Anita, for example, was unemployed but wanted to work full-time when her children were older and Les wanted to develop his literacy and numeracy skills to help him to secure employment as a gardener. Dave was in work but wanted promotion to a management position. June needed to learn to spell very quickly to enable her to write tickets for her new job in the dry-cleaners and Frank needed to fill in complex forms relating to his farm.

Moving on

Progression to other programmes of study, often as a stage on the way to employment, was another common aim. Tanya needed to undertake further study to prepare for entry to a midwifery training course and Brenda wanted to progress to GCSE Maths and eventually to 'a good job'. The school-leavers all wanted to progress to higher-level vocational courses then employment, with ambitions ranging from hairdressing to banking.

Personal development

A number of learners identified developing confidence and self-esteem as their primary aims. These were very important to them, as they wanted to experience achievement, to feel equal to others and to prove something to themselves and those around them. Nadia wanted 'to do something for myself', and another group of learners wanted to achieve something to tell family and friends.

Rosemary found writing letters difficult and said it made her feel stupid, although she knew she was not, and she wanted to be equal to others. Sally told us, 'I've always been desperate to be normal; don't ask me what normal is, I just want to be like everybody else. Our Zoe makes things look easy whereas I struggle.'

Changing aspirations

Aims and aspirations tended to change as learning journeys proceeded and individuals developed their identities as learners. June summarised this, 'The more you learn, the more you want to learn. It's like a roller-coaster. Once you're on it you keep going.'

Initial aims and aspirations had broadened as horizons extended and learners' belief in their own talent and abilities strengthened. For example, the mothers who had started in order to support their children now wanted to continue to develop their own skills and were thinking about extending their journeys along new progression pathways and considering career possibilities. Eric, who set out because he decided in the pub one day to chase 'this thing called knowledge', now wanted to move from his manual employment to work in an office and nursed a long-term ambition to take A-level English, 'Well, believe it or not, it's to get an A-level. It would be a great achievement considering I couldn't read or write at all 2 years ago.'

3.3 Planning learning

The research identified connections between involvement in planning and levels of satisfaction with progress. Those with the most involvement tended to be the most satisfied with their progress. Surprisingly, only a third of the learners interviewed were closely involved in planning their learning, that is, in the process of working with a tutor to identify their current skills, knowledge, interests, aims and aspirations, agreeing learning goals and negotiating a learning programme to take them forward.

Learner involvement and satisfaction

There was a great deal of awareness of progress and satisfaction with achievement when individuals had worked with a tutor to produce a learning plan which was actively used as a tool to plan, monitor progress and record learning throughout their learning journey.

These learners felt positive about negotiating their personal plans because their learning was focused on their needs and because their involvement made them feel their opinions were valid and valued. Anita saw planning as a process of negotiation between the tutor and learner in which the learner could recognise and use her choices. Dorothy felt the arrangement was 'great' because, 'You're learning what you want to learn and you're learning your way. I was being treated

as an individual and I thought that was good.' Another negotiated a 'gradual' plan with her tutor, as she didn't want any pressure. Rosemary also wanted control over her learning, 'I learn what I want to learn. I won't be pushed into things I don't think I can do.'

Learning to learn

Active learner participation in planning was a motivator, a confidence builder and a stimulus for learning. The skills, knowledge and confidence that made partnership approaches to planning learning possible were often developed as an element of the learning process. Some respondents described how they felt unable to contribute much to the process when they first arrived as they were 'in shock' or did not know what to expect or what was expected of them. Their ability to participate in planning developed as their learning progressed, their confidence developed, their perceptions of themselves as learners became more positive and their sense of what was possible broadened.

Pam was one of the people who said that she had been 'petrified of entering the building' to embark on her journey. At that time she was grateful to be given work to start her off, but she had now developed to a stage where she wanted to define how she works towards her goals. She said that she 'would have died' if anyone had mentioned planning when she first joined, but that she now believed that it should be a joint effort between herself and the tutor.

Low involvement

The learners who had little or no involvement in this aspect of their learning placed less value on active participation in planning. Some had not been assessed or consulted and were not aware of the aims of their learning programme. Leanne's tutor had devised her learning plan, which she had only seen once. A number of learners did not want to be more involved as they regarded the tutors as the experts whose role was to decide what they should learn and how. Shamina had never discussed her long- or short-term goals with her tutor, but said she didn't mind, as she didn't 'have time to make a list of goals'.

Slow progress

There was a correlation between the learners who did not negotiate the content of their learning and low levels of satisfaction with progress. These individuals often felt they were learning too little or moving forward too slowly. Lorna could not identify any improvements since the start of the course and Ingrid felt she was not learning as fast or as much as she wanted because she was going over things she knew rather than tackling new areas. The younger learners felt that their work was too easy and they were 'on the children's fairground ride'. Leanne said, 'It's for babies,' and that made her feel like a toddler, whereas Daniel and Sharon agreed that easy work made them feel as though they were 'thick'.

Shamina was also not getting what she wanted from her course but none of them had connected this in any way to their lack of involvement in developing their learning programmes.

3.4 Pace and progress

Most learners identified their preferred learning pace, which related to factors such as life situations and preferred learning styles. This had not usually been discussed or negotiated with tutors, and levels of satisfaction varied. The learning journey metaphor proved particularly valuable in unlocking the capacity of learners and tutors to discuss pace. It often raised the topic for the first time, and learners found metaphors of transport and place a useful way into discussing pace and distance travelled in learning.

Life situations

Diverse life circumstances related directly to preferred learning pace. People who were balancing learning with many other commitments and responsibilities had made informed calculations as to how much time they could spend and how fast they expected their progress to be. The mothers in a family learning group had busy lives that restricted the time they could devote to learning, but they were already considering their options for when the children were older and they would be ready to 'get on the express train'. Rosemary was out of work but knew that she would have to put her studies on hold if a job came along because earning a living had to be her priority. Some people wanted to make a fast start on a short-intensive or full-time course then to continue learning at a less frenetic pace because they could not afford the time or sustain the speed and intensity for a long period.

A slow, steady ride

Some learners planned a long, steady journey because they felt they needed time to absorb their learning and they did not want to be pushed to go too quickly in class. One person said that she didn't want to look too far into the future and felt uncomfortable about planning a long journey, as she wanted to take small steps, one at a time. Josie, who had spent so many years psyching herself up to go to classes wanted to '...take it a bit at a time and if I get further I'll be quite happy'. Jean had got 'as far as Knutsford' and said, 'I'm not quick at picking things up. I'm taking the longest route.'

Eric acknowledged that he had a long way to go but was happy with his pace of learning, as, 'I'd rather run smooth than crash.' For him 'running smooth' was learning something new every week and reading constantly outside the class to make sure that he retained his knowledge. Others explored pace in terms of the

difference between 60 miles an hour and 30 miles an hour, where you see more and take more in at the slower speed.

Pressure was a big fear that people wanted to avoid. Lorna, for example, appreciated the ethos of her group in which learners could go at their own pace and were not pressured to keep up with everyone else. A number of people said that too much pressure would make them drop out. As Eric explained, 'If they pushed I would turn round and say enough's enough. You can only push me so far then it's a case of you either push me off the side of the boat or you just turn round, slow down and I get back in the boat.'

Speeding

In contrast, swift progress was important to a number of people, especially those who had very specific reasons for joining a class. June had a pressing need to improve her spelling as she wanted to succeed in her new job and Dave, who had to wait several years until his working pattern changed from shift work to regular day-time work to join classes, now wanted to improve his skills quickly to help him get promotion. Fast progress was also important for learners such as Tanya, Molly and Christine, who wanted to improve their skills in time to enable them to access higher-level vocational provision in the next academic year. Tanya felt she was 'waiting at a Pelican crossing'.

Highs and lows

Levels of satisfaction with the speed of learning and distance travelled were varied. On the whole the people who wanted to maintain a steady pace and avoid pressure were pleased with their rates of progress, 'I'm definitely glad I'm on the road. I don't know if I'll get to where I'm going this year but I intend to get to where I want to go. It doesn't matter how long it takes.'

A number of learners were disappointed. They tended to be those who wanted to travel quickly to reach specific destinations, for example Dave, who was frustrated by his slow progress, 'Well, I'm just on the motorway. There's a lot of cars holding me up and I want to get to London quick.' People who had been excluded from active involvement in planning their learning journeys were also more inclined to express dissatisfaction with their progress.

Learners provided interesting insights into the reasons for their slow pace. Some identified a link between their own levels of effort and their progress. Rosemary compared her slow advancement in English with her fast progress in maths, which she loved so much that she often did her homework on the way home from class as she waited in the car to the pick up her children from school. She disliked English and would do anything and everything before studying this subject outside the class. Anita evaded home study when the work became difficult by seeking household tasks to do. Others, like June, realised that their initial expectations had been unrealistic, 'I wanted to be able to spell like yesterday, like setting off in fourth gear.'

Teaching

Teaching and learning strategies and conditions were sometimes sources of frustration. Some learners worked through worksheets that were boring and veered from too easy to 'rock hard' and others were repeatedly given work they felt they could already do or had done before. Olive could identify nothing new she had learned. Although she had asked to learn about punctuation, she said, 'I've learned where full stops went but I knew that anyway.' The young school-leavers felt they raced through the work 'at the speed of Concorde', but fast in this instance was not positive because they were repeating work they already knew and felt they were actually moving forward very slowly.

Group size

Group size was another factor which affected progress. Learners from a group where the tutor to student ratio was two or three tutors to 40 learners were concerned that they had not progressed as much as they had hoped when they embarked on the course. They recognised that the demands on tutor time meant they could not have much individual tuition. In addition, they did not have a clear idea of the starting point from which they could gauge distance travelled as they had not been actively involved in initial assessment.

A different group had expanded from four to eight learners and now felt the group was too big to allow adequate individual time with the tutor. Lorna described having nothing to do for half an hour while she waited for the tutor. She felt that she didn't get enough help and often wondered why she travelled all the way to the class in an evening when she went home feeling she had achieved very little. This group felt the location of the session in a Learning Resource Centre inhibited progress because they were uncomfortable with the constant flow of people around them as they tried to learn, 'We don't want to go too fast. We just feel that we could do with another guard and that we could have this room as our carriage instead of the library.'

3.5 Learning gain

People described their learning gains and achievements in relation to diverse real world practices and contexts. These illustrate the richness and variety of ways in which the technical skills acquired in classrooms are used in learners' lives.

Real life activity

Individuals frequently referred to what they could now do in real life situations and these encompassed a diverse range of activities that involved reading, writing, numeracy and verbal communication skills. They identified literacy and numeracy practices which related to leisure and pleasure, studying and learning,

work, the practical activities of everyday life and involvement in local communities. Skills and knowledge were often used for different purposes. For example, letter writing was used to keep in touch with family and friends, complain about local services, contact children's schools and apply for jobs.

Technical skills

The skill most frequently improved by literacy learners was spelling, although paragraphs, vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, tenses and using a thesaurus were also mentioned. New numeracy skills included times tables, fractions, decimals, long divisions, mental arithmetic and new methods of calculation.

A small number of learners referred only to technical skills when asked what they had learned, for example 'I learned how to spell spaghetti and sausages' or 'I know what a vowel is now.' They tended to be learning in workshop situations, which were characterised by one-to-one interactions with the tutor interspersed with periods of working alone to complete worksheets and other tasks with little or no group learning.

Some learners illustrated how the technical skills they had gained enabled them to carry out real world activities. Theresa, for example, said that she feels 'on a high' because her spelling and paragraphing skills are better so she can now write letters to friends abroad. Sheila reflected, 'My writing's more interesting now that I can use commas and full stops.'

Leisure and pleasure

The leisure and pleasure context included reading newspapers, reading to young children, reading knitting patterns, using the internet, doing crosswords, corresponding with friends abroad, e-mail conversations with friends and family, and writing autobiography and children's stories.

Everyday life

Practical tasks included understanding bills, writing letters of complaint about the bus service, filling in benefits forms, writing Christmas cards and letters to children's schools, cooking and decorating. People were able to make their money go further as they learned to understand prices, calculate change and work out the cost of goods on special offer, for example two for the price of one. Mel used her new understanding of metric measurement when shopping for fabric and food and Les explained how understanding percentages helped him to calculate '10% off' offers in shops. Reading labels on food tins helped members of one group to alter their diets.

Work

Other achievements related to work. These included filling in forms, using a dictionary to check spelling, writing dry-cleaning tickets, filling in an accident book, calculating customers' bills and communicating with the public. Leanne believed that her new communication skills would be an asset for her future career as a hairdresser. Achievements in job seeking related to letters of application, filling in forms, compiling CVs and attending interviews.

Community activity

Some learners felt that they were able to participate in community activities more effectively, for example by reading in church and chairing community association meetings. Dorothy's new verbal communication skills have changed the way she conducts her community meetings as, for instance, instead of telling folk to 'Shut up!' she now uses her extended vocabulary to 'talk them round'. Kate has widened her horizons about the possibilities of writing, which she hopes will make her a more useful member of her community.

Learning situations

Another group of practices related either to their own or their children's learning. They included class homework tasks, reading texts when studying other subjects, class discussions, writing essays and assignments and supporting children with their studies by helping them with their homework or to learn to read or use numbers.

3.6 Confidence and self-esteem

All learners identified significant increases in their confidence and self-esteem. These gains were positive factors in their development as learners and in their progress in literacy and numeracy. The learning journey sessions were the first time many learners were able to explore and compare and analyse their experiences and feelings with peers.

Negative discourse

Many learners had been reluctant to engage in learning as adults, either because they felt they couldn't learn or they would not voluntarily experience something they regarded as an ordeal. Pam, for example, refused the first invitation from the head of her child's school to join a course because she considered herself 'not clever'. The use of this discourse was common as many people described themselves as 'thick' and 'stupid'. Family or friends sometimes reinforced these perceptions in their adult life. For example, Angela's son was less than

encouraging when he asked, 'You're thick, why are you going back to school?' She had stayed 'on the bus' in spite of this negative response.

Adult learning and confidence

Sadly, negative feelings had been reinforced by the adult learning experiences of a small group of learners. Daniel said that he was given low-level work and made to feel 'like I am thick or something'.

The majority of learners were extremely positive about their experiences of adult learning and contrasted them favourably with their negative schooldays. A significant aspect of progress for almost all those interviewed was the realisation that they were 'not thick'. They related how the courses taught them that they had brains and were capable of learning. Pam reflected common views when she said, 'I learned since coming here that I am not a thicko. There are other people like me. I am just as good as everyone else.' Frank said of his group, 'There's nothing wrong with anybody in this room apart from this [holding up a pen]. They're all brilliant, all got special skills outside.'

Power in everyday life

These changes in self-image and increases in confidence were extremely empowering as they broke barriers and enabled people to progress. They broadened what people could do outside the classroom, 'I've realised I'm not thick. It means I can do more in my life.' People were also enabled to challenge or dismiss derogatory comments from family, friends or work peer groups. They felt more able to use their communication skills to seek jobs and to interact on equal terms with others. They were more autonomous when writing and found the release from reliance on others very liberating.

Increased confidence and knowledge empowered Anita who said that education is power as she now had a voice and the ability 'to stick up for herself' when dealing with people who would previously have intimidated her. Pam spoke for the first time at an open meeting organised by the British Dyslexia Association even though the other participants were academics from the university, '...doctor this and doctor that. I put my hand up and spoke. My husband was flabbergasted.' Her new skills equipped her to find the words to speak, but these would have remained inert without the additional ingredient of confidence. It was this that gave her the belief that she had something valid to say, which counted as much as the views of the 'doctors', and the courage to speak. The critical skills developed in the learning journey session enabled her to start to move away from blaming herself for previous failures to realising that external factors contributed to differential achievements in education and life. 'I knew I was just as good as them. They just had more chances than me.'

Confidence and learning

Increased confidence also enhanced learning power. People linked their school failure to embarrassment and fear in class when they joined. Although this diminished over time, fear of failure and worries about being 'stupid' were extremely inhibiting. Pam shared her feelings about getting to the point where she could deal with this fear, 'In a punctuation class the teacher went round the class and made us read out a sentence each. I sat there with sweat running down my back at the thought of it, thinking if this had been a few years ago I would have got up and run out of this class. Later I was really proud of myself.'

The process of learning was even more difficult for those who could not break out from the fear engendered by low confidence. This was described as a circular process, 'If you've no confidence you're not asking and you're not getting answers. You don't learn so you're still not confident and you still won't ask.' In contrast, confidence in capability led directly to changed aspirations. Pam, who had once been so reluctant to engage in learning because of her lack of 'cleverness' and was still nervous in class, had changed her destination and now aimed to go to university one day.

Successful learning and the corresponding confidence gains also led to changes in attitude as learners came to place more value on reading and education. In addition to raising their own aspirations they became more involved in supporting their children's education. Increased confidence also fostered the development of autonomous learning outside the formal learning environment. Rosemary and Anita both felt confident enough to buy computers to use for learning at home, Rosemary to carry on teaching herself and 'picking things up' and Anita primarily to support her children's learning. She felt a distinct sense of irony when her son was praised by his teachers for computer knowledge which he had acquired as a direct result of support from the mother who had only recently regained her self-esteem after that same school had failed her when she was a pupil there.

3.7 Recognising achievement and progress

Learners recognised progress and achievement in relation to how they used their learning in real life. They also used learning records, self, tutor, and peer and external assessment to judge progress.

Like riding a bike

As we have already seen the majority of respondents defined achievement in relation to things they could do in real life situations that that they couldn't do previously.

While learners found demonstration of specific skills in classrooms relevant, many judged whether they had learned something by their ability to use it in the real world outside the classroom, 'I don't know till I do it.'

It is not always possible to define precisely how anyone knows they have learned something but some of the respondents did try to pin this down. They explained that it became something they could do as opposed to something they were learning, practising or struggling with. Rosemary said, 'You just know you have learned by the fact that you can do something and how it makes you feel when you have done it.' In this exchange the interviewer and Eric try to explain how he knows he has learned something.

E 'You know you have learned something when you can do it.'

I 'What do you mean by that?'

E 'Because you can remember it. Like if you're making coffee there's a right way of doing it.'

I 'How do you know it's the right way?'

E 'Because you end up with coffee.'

I 'If you relate this to your learning how do you know when you've learnt something?'

E 'Because you know. It's just there. It's like riding a bike, when you know it if you don't fall off. When you learn to read you carry on reading.'

Others knew as they remembered when they couldn't do something they now felt at ease with, 'When you're doing sommat that you just couldn't do, like, you know, pick up a paper and think, "Oh, I can read that," and six months previously you couldn't read a word of what it said.'

Sometimes it was recognising their ability to do things more quickly and with less effort or feeling enough confidence in their ability to engage in autonomous practices; for example writing letters or filling in forms without asking for help from family members.

Learning records

Learning in class was significant. This tended to be related to decontextualised skills rather than their application and was evidenced through completion of worksheets, tests and tutorial discussion. Course files containing all the work done on the course were frequently kept and records of work were commonly used and highly valued. The formats included learning diaries, learning logs, weekly record sheets and progress comments on learning plans.

The learners who had been least involved in planning their work were less likely to have these records and this was hard for people like Rita, who had no log and had to concentrate a lot to remember where she was up to. On the other hand, some, like Rosemary, felt that 'The best way of recording progress is in your head. You know what you have learned and what you haven't.' When individual items of work were marked but not linked to other achievements, learners tended to have less perception of overall learning gain and distance travelled.

All who kept files and records attached great importance to them and used them independently to see how far they had come, for example by comparing their current work with what they had produced earlier. Frank didn't realise he was learning until he looked back and saw mistakes in previous work which he said he could now correct in his own mind. When she feels disheartened Judith looks back on her folder to remind herself how far she has travelled. Some keep all their drafts to show themselves how far they have come, although Josie keeps only finished, perfect work as she does not want to be reminded of what she views as failure. Records were also used to identify gaps and this was seen as a positive aspect of learning. 'When you record progress you see the gaps that need to be filled then want to learn more.'

In the driving seat

Some wanted to be in the driving seat when assessing class-based learning and liked to see for themselves how much they had learned and progressed. This was done through a process of working in partnership with their tutors. Anita preferred to decide for herself when she could do something. Dorothy wanted to check her own work then get it signed off by a tutor, and Christine received tutor feedback on individual pieces of work but reflected on overall progress by herself. They also said that they were confident their self-assessment was 'more or less accurate' although they did like the tutor to check and validate this.

Tutors as partners

Tutors were viewed as very important. The relationship between tutors and learners was a crucial element of learning and most respondents valued and respected their tutors and trusted their expertise. Sally said, 'If you are lucky enough to work with someone who has been specially trained to help you, you can achieve anything.' Learners liked to work in differing ways with tutors to recognise their learning gain. Tutors' attitudes were really significant, as learners wanted a tutor who made them feel as though they were in charge of their own learning. One group appreciated the accessibility and understanding they received from their tutor, and contrasted this favourably with the attitudes of their school teachers.

Tutors were regarded as trusted partners in the learning process. Learners felt it was important to feel on the same level as their tutor or they wouldn't learn, and progress was viewed as more shaky where negative relationships were reported. This relationship supports learner empowerment but also develops the skills of working with others in the learning and writing process which Jane Mace (2002) has pointed out is carried on by a whole range of people with all levels of literacy in different contexts. Sally described the process of recognising this as she wrote her first ever story for her daughter and realised that editing in consultation with her tutor was a valid part of producing work and not negative evidence of her failure to do it alone as she had previously thought.

A small number of learners did not trust their tutor's expertise. Some perceived the level of their work as too easy, and the school-leavers in this position described their tutor as a 'know all'. Others did not always think their tutor's assessment was right and some said they would challenge comments they did not agree with, whereas others said they would like to but would be too shy.

Learners who felt they had made little or no progress tended to have insufficient involvement in the assessment process, for example the learners from a full-time programme who had no clear picture of their progress. They expected assessments based on interviews with the tutor at the end of their courses but reported they had no ongoing reviews of learning. They had no clear idea of where they were up to on their route and all felt they had made insufficient progress.

Verbal or written feedback?

Most learners wanted to be involved in the assessment, and liked to draw on the tutor's expertise to judge their achievements either to validate their self-assessment or to tell them if they had done something 'right'. Some said they learned by the tutor pointing out errors. Verbal feedback was the preferred method of receiving feedback. Written marks on work were very emotive for some and took them straight back to the negative experiences and emotions of their schooldays, particularly with the tutor who used a red pen to mark work. The personal attention in interactive sessions was appreciated and they were seen as providing opportunities for constructive feedback in which they could discuss the work, ask questions, and seek clarifications and further information. Some disliked written comments as they saw them as a closed, one-way process.

Some learners wanted written comments on work in addition to regular oral feedback sessions or tutorials and a small number preferred written to verbal feedback. They wanted comments and not just ticks, which reminded them of school. They felt written comments were a more permanent reminder of achievement and that written suggestions for achievement were easier to follow.

Praise and motivation

Overt appreciation of the effort devoted to gaining achievement was a significant factor in learning. The value of tutor praise in addition to 'ticks on work' as a motivational tool was stressed a number of times. Encouragement from Kate's tutor 'spurred her on', and Anita identified the worth of a respected tutor saying 'Well done!' This was also a key factor in building confidence and self-esteem.

Conversely, lack of interest in their achievements or dismissive remarks were profoundly discouraging. Negative experiences resulted in lower confidence in tutor assessment processes. Pam described her treatment in a previous class which she left following the tutor's response to a question she asked in front of the class, 'You are not an A-level student, only a basic student.' The tears this humiliation caused almost made her give up learning but she had transferred to

her current group where the encouragement and praise from both tutor and peers were a significant factor in her progress.

Peer support

Peer support was important to learning and achievement. Learners used each other's skills and knowledge to support and validate their learning and to share successes as they told each other how they were progressing, 'We tell each other and we share ideas.' A number identified the benefits of the social aspects of the group, which prevented them experiencing 'a lonely journey'. They made friends, had a laugh and enjoyed the sessions. This motivated them to continue attending classes even when they faced 'traffic jams and road works'. These included problems in their lives, finding the work boring or difficult, or feeling that progress was slow. When asked what helped to keep her coming to the group, Elaine said it was 'The lady I sat next to.'

Positive relationships and trust emerged as learners progressed on their learning journeys together, especially when tutors had actively fostered the development of collaborative group dynamics. Most reported feeling initial discomfort with the prospect of exposing their weaknesses to others and some, like Rosemary, thought at first that peers would not help their learning but grew to enjoy and value working with peers. Olive liked to work in the group by the time she was interviewed but stressed that she would never have said that when she started, and Eric had also taken a while to come round to the idea.

Members of the group were seen to empathise with their difficulties and cheered their achievements, as in Elaine's group where 'Everybody contributes to each other. If you answer a question right everybody cheers for you.' Praise from the peers they had grown to respect, like praise from the tutor, functioned as a valuable motivator.

Shared expertise in verifying achievement

Class members started to pool their knowledge and use each other as mutual experts as the collaborative ethos developed in the groups. One group, for example, reported solving problems and comparing notes as a frequent and ongoing element of their learning process. Dorothy felt that members of her group could understand each other's strengths and weaknesses and help each other.

Learners shared work, supported each other to carry out tasks and worked out together whether they had got them right or not. They discussed answers with friends then asked either tutors or other members of the group to check whether they were right.

When asked how they knew whether these judgements were correct they said they knew which members of the group were good at certain things. They trusted this expertise and felt confident to ask them to check their work. Mary said that members of her group asked each other and were confident if it looked or

sounded right but would also ask the tutor if they were not sure or if nobody knew. Some groups preferred the tutor to carry out the assessment while others were more autonomous and preferred the tutor to verify their own judgements.

Participating as an 'expert' developed learners' self-esteem. Requests for advice from peers indicated they had skills and knowledge that were both valid and valued, and this had a very powerful impact on their confidence and sense of self-worth.

Formal assessment and tests

Learners articulated the level of pressure they wanted in relation to assessment of achievement. Most did not want to take exams and the overwhelming preference was for ongoing assessment. Tests in class were welcomed by a few, and others agreed to take them but found the experience very stressful. College certificates were highly valued and a small number of learners were positive about external examinations.

Some form of assessment to measure and recognise learning gain was valued but most learners preferred this to be an ongoing process based on discussion and portfolio building supported by tutor feedback and individual reflection, particularly where skills acquisition and the ability to do things in their lives were the main aims. People said they did not want to be exposed to the stress and pressure of tests and exams, 'I like doing units because there is no pressure.'

Fear and panic were the main reasons given for aversion to tests: 'The word test is frightening at any age. You look at an exam paper and your mind goes blank and you're not doing the best by yourself.' This fear was so strong that some, including Judith and Olive, said they would not attend a class where they had to do tests, and others said they would leave their course to avoid testing.

Although most learners felt they would have been unable to take tests when they started their course, some said they had learned to cope with tests. They were still not a positive choice but some were now willing to have to go and one or two thought they would demonstrate progression in learning. Pam had a test in class and said it was the most frightening experience of her life. She said that the fear would never really disappear but recognised that she might be able to cope with it better as she progressed.

External certification was important for a few because it was a reward for achievements and a motivator which 'spurred them on'. There was a feeling that exams still make you feel sick but results and certificates give you a boost and confidence. Some had moved from total fear at the beginning to wanting or agreeing to take an exam. Rosemary, for example, preferred ongoing assessment but admitted she was quite excited about taking an exam. Melissa also panicked about exams but gained more confidence when she passed her first one.

3.8 Discussion points

The impact of fear

Researchers learned of the depth of the fear, shame and embarrassment felt by many individuals and one said that the insight she gained into the intensity of this fear was one of the major lessons she learned from participating in this research.

This has implications for recruitment and retention. If these learners had felt so strongly, how could those who tried and left or those who never made it through the doors be supported to overcome these fears and feelings?

As a direct result of the research, learners in one college have worked with tutors to establish a new mentor scheme in which learners will work in communities using their own experiences to support new learners to take their first steps.

Diverse aims and aspirations

Many of the reasons given for joining will be familiar to experienced literacy and numeracy tutors but, as some of the researchers commented, it was salutary to be reminded of them. This is because engagement with learners' individual circumstances can so easily be marginalised by the plethora of paperwork and administrative tasks currently required by quality and audit regimes, which often eat into time that could be spent listening to learners.

Listening to learners would enable us to continue to discover new angles on participation that are not so widely known or acknowledged. The comments on family attitudes and relationships provide an example of this. Many parents, especially mothers, will be familiar with the experience of being teased or humiliated by their children. This has implications for family learning as it raises questions, such as whether parents who are being treated in this manner by their children will want to learn together with them and is this one reason for failure to take up these opportunities? How can this aspect of family relationships and learning be addressed through the curriculum?

Planning

Two-thirds of the learners interviewed were excluded from, or had perfunctory involvement in, the process of planning their learning. This was despite extensive promotion of the importance of involving learners in planning their learning by national bodies including the ABSSU, the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) and the BSA.

There was most satisfaction with progress where learners were actively engaged with tutors in the processes of planning content and recognising learning gain. This link between learners' participation in planning learning and their satisfaction with progress is perhaps an obvious one, but this study has indicated that it is

one that is by no means universally embedded in practice. Measures to convince tutors of the benefits of a partnership approach in which both tutors and learners contribute to the planning process from a basis of mutual respect would make a positive contribution to development of this fundamental area of practice. The degree to which learners choose to be involved and the time at which they feel ready to do so may vary, but they will make more informed choices if these are based on knowledge and awareness of the benefits and possibilities of mutual negotiation of learning. Tutors may need support and training in developing the learning processes which give learners the confidence and skills to become actively involved.

Pace

The journey metaphor, with its language of travel and movement, was particularly effective in unlocking the capacity of learners to discuss their views on the pace of their learning and progress. This is a fundamental question but one that we found was rarely discussed with learners in practice. It was extremely important for learners as they balanced their life circumstances with their learning aspirations. They felt strongly about the speed at which they wished to learn and there was some dissatisfaction with pace. The learning journey was an effective vehicle for learners to express their choices and priorities and was strongest in this area where traditional discussion was weakest. More attention to issues of speed and pace in learning programmes could improve the quality of practice in relation to retention, progress and progression.

Learning outcomes

The weight placed by learners on gaining skills for real life and the importance of developing confidence has implications for planning and recognising learning, particularly for defining learning outcomes and evaluating achievement.

The new adult core curricula are designed to provide a mechanism for breaking down literacy and numeracy activities into their underpinning skills. These are then prioritised and written as learning objectives or outcomes that form the basis of individual learning plans. This means that outcomes tend to be stated and assessed mainly in terms of skills and not related to learners' ability to act confidently and effectively in real world situations. As we have seen in this research, it is the latter which learners viewed as a significant indicator of successful learning and progress.

Real life outcomes, along with developments in confidence and self-esteem, are usually defined as 'soft' outcomes by funding and quality regimes. Soft outcomes typically relate to those which are seen as intangible, subjective, not absolute and therefore very difficult to quantify and measure in absolute terms. Hard outcomes are those that are viewed as quantifiable and easy to measure.

In practice the division of literacy, numeracy and communication skills into hard and soft outcomes is more problematic than this simplistic distinction suggests. It

could be argued that at all levels and in all contexts we are often dealing with degrees of success rather than clearly defined absolutes. Defining success criteria for literacy and numeracy skills is a complex task and addressing the issue of learning outcomes related to personal development and the use of skills in real situations adds further layers of difficulty.

Despite this, if learners do regard them as so important should we not be developing processes which assist the translation of these types of learning aims into learning outcomes which could be integrated with outcomes relating to technical skills? This is a key area for further research and development work.

We need to ask how mechanisms can be put in place to ensure three things. One, that planning processes ensure that the broader learning objectives that are not defined in the curriculum – but which this research has shown are equally or more valid to learners – are not lost. Two, as Grief and Windsor (2002) also suggest, that consideration is given to how these can be presented as tangible learning objectives. Three, that strategies are developed to integrate learning objectives that relate to real life contexts with those that define the technical skills needed to achieve them. This research provides a starting point although further research is needed. It offers a tool which helps learners and tutors to translate the curriculum in ways which relate technical skills to the lives of learners. It also offers a language for expressing achievements and progress.

Recognising learning gain

Learners demonstrated that they thought about learning and progress in terms of how they used skills in their real life situations. In order to make recognition of learning gain more meaningful to learners, it is important to explore ways in which learning gain in real life contexts can be identified and validated to complement demonstration of competence in technical skills in the classroom environment. The adult literacy and numeracy core curricula offer frameworks based on descriptors of technical skills organised into levels. These can then be related to different contexts relevant to learners' lives and aspirations.

This research illustrates the imperative to develop robust processes which relate skills to the contexts of learners' lives in meaningful and relevant ways when planning and evaluating leaning. Some suggestions can be found in Grief and Windsor (2002) and further research may also be needed to develop the knowledge base of this issue.

Many learners want to take the lead in assessing their own learning and this raises questions of how they can be supported to do so. This will involve considerations such as how they evaluate learning, how to recognise achievements in real life and how to reflect critically on performance in order to identify the next learning challenges.

The issue of validation is important and finding ways of validating learners' self-awareness of learning gain presents a major challenge. This can be especially tricky when considering achievements in real life settings outside the classroom.

Recognition of these achievements is empowering because it focuses on what people can do rather than on their deficits; it links directly to their initial aims and objectives and provides a more complete picture of actual learning gain.

This does, however, pose the question of how learners can be supported to develop the skills required to enable them to make meaningful and reliable evaluations of their learning. A further consideration is what form the validation of these judgements could take without creating unwelcome and unwieldy layers of assessment-related bureaucracy.

Learning to learn

The use of the learning journey metaphor illustrated the power of developing holistic and critical views of learning. This approach offered one tool for working with groups of learners to develop their skills for critical thinking, analysis and participation in learning processes. It enabled learners to make more sense of their current learning journeys and to locate these in the wider context of their learning and their lives. They were able to take a more active role in their learning as they developed in confidence and their sense of what was desirable and what was possible was enhanced. The researchers also identified the importance of this as they reflected on the awareness they had gained through participation in the project.

One of the key lessons of the research was the strength of approaches such as the learning journey as a tool to empower learners to take an active and critical role in all aspects of their learning. Developing this as an integral aspect of basic skills provision, by using methods and materials such as the learning journey metaphor, would have a significant impact on empowering learners to become more actively engaged and effective as learners. This could improve the quality of teaching and learning, raise aims and aspirations, and support progression in learning and in other areas of life.

3.9 Implications for practice

- Tutors should take deliberate steps to try to develop equal working relationships with learners which recognise and value the strengths and knowledge each can bring to the process. This would include working with learners to identify their learning preferences, including pace, relationships with tutors and peers, measurement and feedback methods.
- Learners' confidence and skills to participate in learning processes develop as learning progresses. Learning programmes should develop these skills. The use of the learning journey metaphor could be one mechanism to do so.
- Learning programmes should include learning outcomes relating to learners' aims that are not specified in the national curricula. They should integrate learning aims relating to everyday life, personal and technical skills.

- Strategies for measuring and validating learning gain that reflect learners' ways of knowing should be developed and piloted then disseminated to the wider field. These would relate to use of learners' records, more effective self-assessment processes, peer assessment, achievement in everyday life, and recognition of distance travelled.
- The above processes would take time and this would have to be acknowledged in funding allocation and individual tutor timetables. Tutor training would also be essential.
- The fact that many learners are deterred by, or do not seek qualifications, and have a range of different learning outcomes has implications for the setting and achievement of national targets.
- The findings had strong messages about the importance of learner involvement, learning approaches and negotiating and measuring learning outcomes. Local LSCs could work with other relevant agencies including the ABSSU and the BSA to support dissemination, for example by developing and funding training and other mechanisms to share good practice.
- Local LSCs could also take account of these research findings to inform their basic skills delivery plans and when they develop criteria for awarding funds such as Standards Funds and Local Initiative Funds.
- Further research is needed into the above areas, particularly the development, demonstration and validation of achievement of learning outcomes for real life and personal skills; the interplay between increased confidence and learning; and the roles, trust and dynamics of peer recognition of learning.

4 Organising the project

The project developed a particular collaborative model of practitioner research that involved working with staff across a number of institutions. This model is relatively uncommon in basic skills research and the team developed a number of effective approaches. These, with the problematic areas and lessons learned, are described in detail here as they might have messages for future developments in practitioner research.

This section:

- outlines the project structure, aims and rationale for selecting the research topic
- describes how the researchers were recruited, barriers to continued participation and identifies the lessons learned from this experience
- describes the aims and content of the training programme
- describes and evaluates the support provided for the researchers
- suggests implications for practice.

4.1 Project organisation and management

The North West regional director of the LSDA was responsible for overall management of the project, which was administered from the LSDA regional office. As project coordinator I was responsible for designing the project structure, developing the research material, planning and delivering the training, supporting and liaising with the researchers, collating the research findings, writing the final report and working with the director and steering group to disseminate the findings.

The work was guided by a steering group (see Appendix 4), which met five times during the life of the project. Members were people from the North West region who had an interest and expertise in basic skills and research. The group was active in the process of defining the research area. Subsequently, members discussed the progress of the project and advised on a range of issues which included ethical questions, how to reconcile the project goal of developing the research capacity and skills of new practitioner researchers with the need to produce quality research, the report structure, project evaluation and disseminating the findings. Members also provided specific support outside the meetings, for example by commenting on the draft research frameworks. Mary Hamilton from Lancaster University contributed to the training and was instrumental in the development of strong links between the project and the National Research and Development Centre for Literacy and Numeracy (NRDCLN).

LSDA regional research projects are required to research issues that will benefit practice, develop research capacity, foster a collaborative approach to research in the region and involve HE institutions, working alongside FE and other partners. The project was designed to fulfil this remit while responding to regional research priorities. While this was a regional project, we recognise the research area selected is of national concern and that the findings are likely to have significance outside the region.

The research aims were to:

- contribute to the body of knowledge in this area of research and practice
- develop collaborative working practices involving different institutions
- develop research capacity among researchers and managers
- develop mechanisms which place the learner at the centre of learning and research practices
- identify further research areas
- develop the North West region's capacity to both contribute to and learn from the work of the NRDCLN.

Research topic

The current drive to achieve higher and consistent standards of teaching and learning is welcome and has led to much debate around issues related to learning outcomes, achievement and assessment. These have been addressed in a number of recent publications including Hayes *et al.* (1999), Greenwood *et al.* (2001), Turner (2001) and Turner and Watters (2001). Despite this, researchers such as Brooks *et al.* (2000) have identified a lack of research and knowledge about the reasons for progress and achievement in basic skills.

> *There should be an immediate, structured programme of studies exploring the factors thought to cause progress in basic skills. No other research in the field should be given priority over this.*
>
> Brooks *et al.* (2000, p155)

The work of Grief and Windsor (2002), which addresses learning outcomes and achievement in non-accredited basic skills and ESOL, is an important contribution to this area of knowledge, but there is still an urgent need to know more to inform developments relating to achievement and progress in basic skills. There are still gaps; for example, in the knowledge we have relating to learners' perspectives, also noted by Brooks *et al.* (2000). Work by Turner and Watters (2001) provided valuable insights into learners' views on approaches to identifying achievement in non-accredited adult learning. It was felt that this work could be complemented by an in-depth study with a specific focus on literacy and numeracy.

The steering group, therefore, decided that it could make a valuable contribution by focusing on learners' perceptions of progress and achievement in literacy and numeracy. It was believed that adding learners' perspectives is an important priority because progress towards achieving basic skills targets and delivering a learner-focused agenda will be limited unless the views of learners are researched so that their voices and perspectives can inform the development of policy and practice at national, institutional, learner and researcher level.

There is a potential paradox at the heart of the issue in that the major funding body, the Learning and Skills Council, and the inspection agencies emphasise the centrality of the needs and interests of learners, but learning is planned and judgements about progress and achievement are made primarily in the context of national standards, curricula and assessment criteria. It is important, therefore, that in teaching and learning practice these national frameworks are interpreted in ways that relate to learners' own views and priorities. If learners' needs really are to be central it is essential to discover how they want to experience learning processes and to use their perspectives to inform the development of policy and practice. As Turner and Watters (2001, p2) put it:

> *It is essential that the design of these developing processes, indicators and standards should recognise those aspects of learning that learners identity as being both in their interests and of interest to them. Without this, any system to fund, inspect or manage achievement will be significantly poorer and at risk of failure.*

Participating institutions

We were concerned to investigate the research question in diverse contexts in order to bring in a broad range of learner perspectives and to start to identify similarities and differences between learning experiences in different settings. Steering group members supported us to recruit different institutions drawn from each of the five subregions in the North West. Providers represented further education, adult and community learning and the voluntary sector in both urban and rural settings. They were offering accredited and non-accredited literacy and numeracy in group and one-to-one workshop-type provision in colleges, adult education centres, community venues and workplaces. Unfortunately, partners who would have brought a perspective from the voluntary sector and workplace basic skills had to withdraw at a stage when it was too late to bring in other providers. The eight remaining partners represented FE and local authority provision in all the settings except the workplace.

4.2 Recruiting the researchers

The research team consisted of researchers from FE colleges and adult education provision. Their research qualifications and experience varied. Institutions were responsible for recruiting staff to the project and this meant that

they arrived with differing levels of knowledge, expectation and commitment. The level of support offered to their staff by institutions varied greatly and some researchers regrettably had to withdraw because of time pressures. Training in research skills was provided by a series of four day-long sessions, which were planned to relate closely to each phase of the research. Further support was provided through telephone, e-mail and face-to-face contact with the coordinator. Take up of this support varied and this had an impact on the quality of the research.

The research team

Fourteen people were trained and carried out the research (see Appendix 3). The group comprised one manager, two advice workers and eleven literacy and numeracy tutors. All except one were employed in a full-time capacity. Two had masters degrees but the others had no research qualifications. Experience of research varied as some participants were carrying out research for the first time and others had already gained limited experience through undertaking research for undergraduate and masters degrees, teaching diplomas and employment purposes. The methods used in this project were new to all participants.

Recruitment

The project was not involved in the selection of individual staff. Intermediaries, usually the managers who had agreed to institutional participation in the project, carried this out. One effect of this was that researchers arrived at the first training meeting with different levels of knowledge and expectations about the project as the background information we produced had not reached all the participants. The reasons given for joining the project ranged from 'asked by my line manager to take part' to 'keen interest in research and its implications for FE'.

Institutional support

A widespread lack of appreciation of the value of research in the sector was reported by the researchers. Senior management approved participation in the project, but organisations differed significantly in the ways in which this was translated into support for their staff.

Some institutions demonstrated their commitment by taking an interest in the progress of the research and agreeing remission, and the hourly-paid tutor was able to negotiate payment for time spent on the research. One college has since added research skills to the job description of the Advanced Practitioner post, set up a research group in college and promoted the benefits of research to staff across the college.

In contrast, line managers were not always enthusiastic and sometimes were overtly reluctant to support the project. One researcher, for example, was not allocated any remission from a weekly teaching load of 23 hours. She was given

additional work by the college during the project and required to prioritise these new tasks.

> *Apart from my colleagues taking part in the research I did not feel that the institution gave me support. My line manager was reluctant for us to participate and did not ask about progress, findings, etc. None of my other duties was removed during the project. I had to absorb the additional work. I did feel that colleagues from the local LSC were supportive in that they asked about the project and were genuinely interested in the findings.*
>
> Researcher

Time pressures

One person withdrew completely because of the pressure of work and three were unable to complete the data analysis for the same reason.

Estimates of time spent on the project ranged from 48 to 124 hours over 22 working weeks. The main reason for the difference was that we had asked each institution to carry out 15 interviews, including one group interview. This was based on the assumption that a team would carry out the research but, with hindsight, we should have adjusted this where researchers were working alone.

The timescale of the project created pressures as we started at the beginning of December, which was so near the end of term that it was difficult to organise the pilot phase. The researchers were trying to finish the data analysis and make sense of the findings in late spring and early summer, which is one of their busiest periods of the year.

Lessons learned

Valuable lessons were learned to inform the development of future work of this nature. Projects should:

- take account of the different stages of the academic year when designing projects
- develop robust procedures for recruiting institutions and individuals
- specify the benefits participation in the research can bring to learners, staff and organisations
- be specific about the length of the project and the time needed to enable researchers to take part
- require organisations to demonstrate how they will support their staff to carry out the research
- require individual researchers to commit fully to sustained involvement in all aspects of the project.

4.3 Training

The project aimed to support participants to develop research skills. We also expected that these skills would be valuable in their roles as tutors, managers and advisers as, for example, the skills needed for critical enquiry, reflection and analysis would support them to become more reflective practitioners.

Training meetings

A series of four training meetings aimed to build participants' research skills and to provide opportunities for them to reflect on their progress. The sessions were used to build up peer trust and support and to encourage collaborative approaches to the work.

Each event reviewed the phase of the research process just completed and prepared for the next stage. The key discussion points were recorded and used as the basis of information sheets or additional materials, which were produced and sent out within a few days of each meeting. The aim was to make the process as clear as possible for the researchers. Common formats for reporting and recording were produced, discussed with researchers and amended in order to ensure that everyone adopted a common approach, and to make the process of collating and comparing data more effective.

The initial event offered an introduction to the project, addressed practical questions and prepared participants for starting to do the research. We wanted to reach a common understanding of the aims and principles of the research project and provided initial training on the research process, the research tools, ethical considerations, sampling, conducting interviews and recording data.

As the learning journey materials were a new development and a key research tool, one of the project tasks was to pilot and evaluate their effectiveness. A significant amount of time was spent discussing the aims and content of these materials and sharing ideas on the ways in which they could be used with learners. The approach and materials were then piloted by the teams in each organisation and emerging findings, materials and ideas for use shared in subsequent training days.

The second training day provided an opportunity to share good practice from the pilots as well as problems and solutions. The main question of the day was how they could use the learning journey processes to gather 'rich data'. The group explored what this was in the context of this research and identified the following characteristics:

- it is interesting, meaningful and challenging
- it contains new knowledge or adds to existing knowledge
- it contains learners' histories and stories
- it contains learners' views, reflections and insights

- it is a reflection of how learners (rather than tutors or other professionals) think about their learning experiences
- it explores issues and views in some depth to find answers to why and how questions
- it uses the students' own words, for example, 'don't do formal assessment – it feels like the 11+'
- it raises awareness and so can effect change.

At this stage the researchers displayed differing levels of skill and confidence in working with the learning journey metaphor and interviewing learners. In their evaluations of the pilot they had all requested further training in how to probe for information. The issue was also highlighted in the pilot interview reports and transcripts, which revealed many tantalising instances where interesting comments had been overlooked and opportunities to explore issues in greater depth not exploited. The researchers worked on examples from these scripts to devise strategies and questions to help them to recognise interesting leads and use the learning journey metaphor to gather more detailed data.

The third training day followed completion of the interviews and focused on data analysis. The approach to the analysis is described in detail in Section 5.4. The training outlined the principles and strategies we would use and activities and materials were designed to equip the researchers to carry out the analysis. These activities were based on the transcripts and were used to generate common themes to use as starting points for the analysis. This session included discussion of ways in which participants might progress as researchers, and information about further training and development opportunities.

The final session aimed to bring together the data analysis from the different strands and further develop skills for interrogating the data by identifying the significance of common patterns, similarities and differences. Discussion-based tasks were designed to support the researchers to develop explanations and interpretations of the findings and to identify implications for policy and practice. These conversations produced many interesting insights and suggestions. In spite of this, the potential range of perspectives and mix of ideas was limited as only three of the organisations were represented at this event because of illness, work commitments and holidays. This was disappointing as participant feedback indicated that sharing ideas, thoughts and processes with colleagues was a fundamental element of the process.

Evaluation

All the researchers were very positive about the training, which they found to be 'well structured and informative'. They said that the staged process helped them to understand what was involved in each phase of the research and they felt well prepared. The support materials, which included handouts, guidelines and forms, were very clear and guided them through the research.

I have learned that group dynamics work positively in inspiring researchers to 'go all out' to work against the odds – which is often a heavy workload.

Researcher

4.4 Support

Visits

Additional support was offered through a programme of visits which were arranged to take place during the interview phase of the research in order to review progress, continue to develop the researchers' skills and offer support specific to the needs of individual researchers and strands. The collection of rich data, for instance, was a consistent theme of the training and one which researchers found difficult.

The visits provided the opportunity for a critical discussion of tape extracts or transcripts and to identify strategies for eliciting more in-depth information and insights from respondents using 'missed opportunities' in the interviews as a starting point.

The researchers' feedback commented on the value of this support as they appreciated the positive feedback on the work done to date, specific discussion of their work and the opportunity to strengthen their skills, to 'dig deeper' with her questioning as one researcher put it.

Not all projects were visited, for practical reasons to do with timing and availability. This had three main effects:

- researchers missed the opportunity to develop their skills through face-to-face discussion about their work
- it was difficult to monitor the quality of the research interviews
- transcripts were not seen until the final stage of the project when it was too late to revisit the learners to fill in gaps and follow up interesting leads in more depth.

Telephone and e-mail support

Telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of the coordinator and research peers were circulated and participants were encouraged to use these to seek advice and support from the coordinator and each other. People did use the e-mail and phone to contact the coordinator and commented positively on the prompt, helpful responses, which they said were a factor in keeping them engaged with the project.

We also promoted the e-mail list as a vehicle for sharing ideas, suggestions, concerns, problems and examples of good practice such as particular research

questions that had worked well. In practice, the e-mail list was not used and the researchers had very little contact with colleagues from other institutions between training meetings. This meant that:

- valuable opportunities for sharing problems, solutions, effective interview questions and strategies were missed
- discussion on thoughts, hunches, ideas, themes and implications, at the time they emerged in the data analysis phase, was limited. These might have enriched the findings.

Time was cited as the main reason for this, although one person felt she had not spent enough time with the other people to feel comfortable e-mailing them about problems and another regretted in retrospect that she had not taken up this support opportunity. Those working in teams tended to rely on their team partners for support and advice. One researcher commented that a website would have been more useful to post questions and debate findings and issues but it is difficult to know whether contact through a website rather than an e-mail list would have made any significant difference particularly for those for whom finding time was such a challenge.

Researchers' views

The researchers were enthusiastic about their experiences despite the time it had taken from them. They identified the following benefits as they:

- experienced quality training, developed their research skills and added to their CVs
- forged strong working links with colleagues in other departments and organisations
- appreciated the opportunity to listen to students in depth
- gained an awareness of student perceptions that is rarely available elsewhere
- developed an enthusiasm for research
- believed their institutions had benefited from their training.

This research has given me, personally, an opportunity to sharpen my focus, revisit my motivation and remind myself why I teach.

The training I had for this project has stood me in good stead for tackling the other projects with a degree of confidence.

Taking part in this research has helped me as a researcher get closer to my students and better understand the range of conditions that affect their ability and opportunity to learn.

4.5 Implications for practice

- Take more action at policy level through ABSSU, LSCs and the NRDCLN to promote the benefits of research to organisations.
- Develop a clear procedure for recruiting organisations and researchers including:
  - produce written information about the project including aims, benefits and the time commitment required
  - ensure that organisations commit to supporting researchers with a full understanding of what this implies in practice, including allocation of time to participate
  - agree a process for recruiting researchers
  - draw up a written agreement or contract.
- Provide quality training and support to include phased sessions and clear guidelines and documentation at all stages.
- Design projects and time the phases to take account of workloads at different times of the year.
- Encourage a collaborative approach through meetings and use of technology.
- Ensure the full range of support mechanisms (which are essential in developing research skills in a short time-span) are actively promoted and are accessed by all researchers.

5 Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative approach and used individual and group semi-structured interview frameworks to interview 70 learners.

This section describes:

- the sample of learners and the process used to identify them
- the ethical considerations addressed by the project
- how the interviews were carried out
- how the data was analysed

and

- summarises the key issues
- identifies implications for practice.

5.1 Sampling

Method

The project used non-probability sampling because the numbers of learners to be selected in each institution was small and we had to balance the need to select a representative sample with consideration of what was practical and possible to do. Researchers were asked to select a sample of learners representative of the learner profile of their provision, for example in terms of gender, ethnicity and age, to enable us to capture as many different perspectives as possible. For this reason they were also asked to encourage the quieter and less confident voices to take part.

Boundaries

We set boundaries in order to make comparisons easier, and make the research more manageable and meaningful:

- learners had to have attended basic skills programmes for at least 6 months so that they had some experience of this type of learning to reflect on
- they had to be enrolled on learning programmes in which the primary learning goal was literacy, numeracy or ESOL and be studying at Entry level and Level 1, although it was accepted that some might be operating at Level 2 in some skills because of the 'spiky nature' of learner profiles.

We considered including embedded literacy and numeracy provision but decided that although this had potential as a very fruitful and interesting area of research it was beyond the scope of this particular project.

Learners interviewed

A total of 70 learners were interviewed.

- There were 51 females and 19 males
- They spanned a wide age range from 16-year-old school-leavers to retired people in their 60s.
- The majority of people interviewed were not working. This group included learners attending full-time courses, retired people, unemployed people, and women who were caring for children and keeping house.
- A small number were in full-time or part-time employment.
- Most were described as White British, although one college included a number of learners described as Asian in the sample and another a Chinese woman.

When analysing the data we explored whether there were any patterns or significant similarities or differences linked to locality, types of provision or learner characteristics. Numbers were usually too small to draw any conclusions linked to specific learner characteristics, but one significant factor was the female gender bias. All the researchers and the majority of those interviewed were women so it may be that the findings of this research represent a gender-related view of progress. There were a number of cross-cutting themes which spanned different groups and types of learners and these may carry significant messages for practice.

5.2 Ethical issues

The complexities of ethical problems and dilemmas make definitive solutions difficult to find, but we tried to address ethical issues as thoroughly as possible and to reflect constantly on these in relation to the research practice. We started from the premise that the research should not exploit or damage those who took part then considered the implications of this for the project.

Power inequalities

There are power differentials inherent in this research arena, usually biased in favour of the researchers who have more opportunity to conduct the interviews on their terms. They can, for example, control the direction of the interview, the language used, interpretation of the data and the uses of the research findings.

A major consideration was to identify and try to minimise the potential impact of power differences and personal characteristics on the conduct of the interviews. These may be to do with the effects on the interaction of tutor–learner power relationships, of class or gender differences or different levels of confidence and self-esteem. The learning journey metaphor activities were designed to promote this equalising of the interview relationships.

Information and consent

Researchers tried to ensure that all those who took part were fully informed about the process and purpose of the research and that they consented to take part. The steering group agreed that consent forms would make this practice more robust but this was proposed after the start of the interviewing phase of the project and it was too late to introduce them at that stage.

Confidentiality and anonymity are also important ethical issues with problematic aspects. Most learners agreed to take part on condition that their contributions would be anonymous. Some individuals, once they had participated in interviews, wanted to be identified in the report whereas others feared that publication of names of peers from their group would expose them. The steering group and the researchers discussed this and felt that we needed to be consistent and to honour the confidentiality commitments we had made so decided to identify the institution but not the individuals who took part.

The steering group had to consider further implications of the confidentiality bargain. As it became clear that some learners were not only displaying keen insights but were also very committed to their own learning and that of others, it became tempting to ask them to take on roles as publicists and learning champions. We had to consider whether we could do this when their interviewer had guaranteed anonymity and decided we could not introduce the possibility at this stage. This question can be revisited when the research is published as the learners who took part and others who are interested could be approached in the context of progression from the research.

Dealing with poor practice at work

Further problems arose when some researchers discovered poor quality practice in their institutions. They had to tease out ways of dealing with this while staying within the boundaries of the research bargain. One researcher, for example, found inadequate levels of learner involvement in planning linked to high levels of frustration about inappropriate levels of work, which inhibited their progress and achievement. As team leader she felt she couldn't let this practice continue, but she could not approach the tutor directly because of her commitment to confidentiality and had to seek an alternative way of resolving the issue.

5.3 The interviews

Interview framework

The researchers used a semi-structured framework (see Appendix 2). We believed that what happens at the start of a learning journey is inextricably connected with how learning then takes place so that a holistic approach to learners' journeys was likely to generate deeper insights into achievement than if progress and achievement were investigated in isolation. For this reason the issues covered included learner aims and planning practices in addition to questions relating to progress and achievement.

Asking questions

Interviewing, finding the right questions and the right way to ask them, is a difficult art. The researchers carried out pilot interviews to test the research framework, develop effective questions and practise their skills. The pilots were evaluated then the framework and materials were modified to take account of this experience.

The researchers developed sample questions in the training days but did not work their way through fixed questions in the interviews. They used a prompt sheet in the interviews and were encouraged to structure their conversations in ways that were suitable for the individuals or groups they were working with, using the metaphor to stimulate ideas where appropriate. Learners often strayed from the topic or introduced new areas, which sometimes became significant themes in the research, for example their reflections on learning in school.

Organising interviews

Researchers did not interview their own groups. The reasons for this were:

- to encourage the informants to speak more freely than they might have done to their own tutor, particularly when they were critical
- to free the tutors of any preconceptions they may have had because they 'knew' their own learners
- to reduce the possibility of the tutor supplying the 'answers'.

Despite some initial reluctance, most researchers later acknowledged that they felt they had obtained more data than they would have elicited from their own students. They commented that learners had opened up, particularly where they had established a rapport in the learning journey session. Two of the researchers continued to feel that learners had found it difficult to speak to someone they did not know.

Some researchers encountered logistical problems when negotiating with one or more tutors and trying to fit in time for the interviews. They had to agree whether these would take place during learning sessions with the disadvantage that learners lost some of the session. Organising them at different times had implications for learners such as travel time, costs and childcare. Researchers were sometimes teaching when the learners were available for interview and this had implications for release and cover. Some class tutors were reluctant to give up teaching time for the learning journey discussions. Others were suspicious of the process and one even insisted on sitting in on interviews in the pilot stage.

Individual and group interviews

Group and individual interviews were used, and both types generated interesting and complementary data. Each researcher was asked to carry out at least one group and two individual interviews. The reasons for this were:

- to include the views of as many learners as possible
- because they tend to yield different types of information
- as a training device to enable the researchers to gain practical experience of both types of interview situation. They were also encouraged to reflect on the differences between the types of interviews and the information you can get from them.

Group interviews

Pairs of researchers carried out the group interviews. They were very effective as:

- participants felt more relaxed when with their peers
- they encouraged each other, jogged each other's memories and sparked off new ideas and thoughts
- they added to each other's views of their learning. For example, when one person described how she wanted to achieve too much too quickly at the beginning of her course as 'starting in fourth gear', another group member pointed out that she didn't give in to discouragement but kept going, 'You didn't stall though.'

Individual interviews

The individual interviews also yielded interesting information and insights as they:

- provided cohesive overviews of individuals' journeys in contrast to the glimpses obtained in the group interviews, which sometimes offered a tantalising picture that could not be explored in depth. One person who took part in a group interview then requested an individual interview as she had more to say than the group situation had allowed

- allowed respondents to disclose information or views that they may not have wished to discuss with their peers
- gave a voice to people who found it difficult to talk in a large group.

Capturing responses

There was a tension between the project aims of training new researchers with those of producing meaningful, high quality research. As with any learning, the researchers needed time and space to develop their skills. They started from different points and progressed at different rates.

It was perhaps inevitable that some new researchers had travelled further than others and the amount and quality of the data collected was uneven. Some interviewers had used prompts and follow-up questions very skilfully to capture interesting experiences and observations, whereas other responses were more minimal. This may of course be connected to the reluctance of learners to open up, but is also likely to be linked to the experience and skills of the interviewers. We addressed this issue through the training, support and individual feedback but, because of the limitations on their time already discussed, some researchers did not produce transcripts until the end of the project when it was too late for individual comment and development. Although there were differences, all the researchers did make progress and all the interviews added something to the findings and contributed to the overall picture of learners' views.

5.4 Data analysis

The research teams interrogated their own data to look for patterns and themes. They then discussed, compared and contrasted their ideas and suggestions with their research colleagues in order to identify common trends and themes. Finding a process that would enable us to make sense of the data presented a considerable challenge as researchers worked in different institutions across a wide geographical area and we had almost 40 interview transcripts. The account of data analysis in Barton and Hamilton (1998) was a useful source and we adapted some of the methods they described.

Seeking themes

The first step was to look for patterns and themes in the data. Most of the interviews had been transcribed and the main points summarised in research reports. Researchers scrutinised these documents in order to identify themes.

- They started with themes suggested by the research framework, for example learners' aims and aspirations, planning, what they learned and how they knew they had learned.

- New themes were added as they were suggested by the data, for example the importance of pace to learners.
- They also looked for any common discourse patterns or features and found, for example, frequent uses of the words such as 'thick' and 'stupid', which led to further analysis of this pattern.

Grids were used as a device for sorting and organising data so that it could be compared. Summary information from each learner or group was recorded vertically on the grids, which made it easy to see the characteristics and patterns of an individual or group. The information was also organised by theme so that all the information from different learners on a particular theme was on the same horizontal line.

Finding patterns

Researchers could then seek patterns in the data. One example of this was that we began to identify learners' different preferences relating to the pace at which they liked to learn by comparing the information on the horizontal line. We could then use the vertical slice to investigate whether these patterns were related to any particular types of learners or to other themes. In the above example we could ask questions such as whether preferences were related to gender or age or were influenced by particular aims and aspirations. Some themes were seen to contain several layers, which we then explored for further patterns. One example of this was the theme of how learners know they have learned something. We started to see that learners said this took place in real life, as well as in the classroom where it was based on self-awareness, tutor feedback and peer response, and that each of these had different features and emphases.

Interpretation

Researchers also had to think about the implications of individual interpretations on the group findings and to decide which findings were significant. Individual researchers were supposed to work with others in their teams to produce an analysis based on findings from their institution. These were then brought to the whole group for further comparison, discussion and revision. This process worked effectively with the researchers who stayed with the whole process. For example, one researcher had discounted the significance of something only mentioned by one of her respondents but revisited it when she saw it repeated in other research reports.

Comparison of analysis from the different groups also enabled us to start to identify which findings had most significance. It is easy to distort the data and under or overplay the significance of different aspects. Researchers were asked to keep checking their documents to ensure that there was evidence to support their suggestions and these were also tested with other members of the research group.

It was recognised that the views of learners who had taken part in the research would have been valuable in the interpretation phase of the research process, but this proved almost impossible to organise within the constraints of this project. Most of the learners had finished their courses by this phase of the research. The researchers were struggling to find time to carry out the data analysis and did not have the capacity to organise additional sessions to discuss the findings with learners.

The next step was to compare and refine the data analysis, then to look for explanations for these findings and to identify implications for practice. Some researchers were unable to complete the data analysis phase of the work and only three researchers attended this final session. They engaged with this process in a very thoughtful and reflective manner and made valuable suggestions that have been incorporated in the report.

The analysis remained incomplete at this stage and it fell to the project coordinator to draw it together. As result, many of the explanations and implications for practice offered in the text have not been explored in group sessions. To compensate for this, all researchers and members of the steering group received a copy of the report and were invited to comment on it. Some took the opportunity to do so. When writing I have tried to remain faithful to the flavour of the group discussions but the interpretations inevitably reflect my own perspectives. These are informed by the view that basic skills teaching and learning should be based on principles of learner autonomy and power and related to the different ways in which language, literacy and numeracy are used in society, see for example Crowther *et al.* (2001).

5.5 Implications for practice

Much has been learned from this project but some issues would benefit from further exploration. They could be tested by similar research projects. Some thoughts are noted below.

- Develop strategies and approaches to resolve ethical dilemmas before the start of the research and add to and review these as it progresses. This could include developing a more sophisticated consent process.
- Interviewers did not interview their own learners and reflected that it was an effective method for this particular project. Alternatively, as working with other groups proved to be so difficult to organise, it may be more practical to identify research questions and approaches that enable researchers to work with their own students.
- Put in place strategies for commenting and reflecting on individual researchers' achievements and progress throughout the research and supporting individual development where needs are identified.

- Develop approaches for reflecting on initial findings and interpretation with the learners and plan these into the timetable.

6 Conclusion

This research brought learners' voices to the fore and the research process itself was valuable in facilitating learners' reflections and confidence to communicate their views. This provided new insights into their perspectives on learning processes and learning gain that have implications for policy, practice and further research.

The findings pointed to the importance of developing more democratic learning processes and of developing learners' skills to participate in them. The use of the learning journey metaphor illustrated the power of developing holistic and critical approaches to learning which could be further built on in research and teaching and learning practices. The ways in which learners identified learning aims and evaluated progress and achievement can be used to contribute to current development work on what constitutes success in learning and how this can be evaluated and recorded. The question of pace of learning and progress was a fundamental issue for learners but one that we found was rarely discussed with learners in practice. It is a key area for further investigation.

This research project pointed to further areas for research.

- These methods and findings are based on the views of a relatively small sample of learners (most of whom were female and white). They need to be tested with other learners in other settings, such as males, members of ethnic minority groups, learners on ESOL programmes, learners in workplace learning, etc.
- There is scope for exploring issues raised in this research in more depth, such as the importance of pace of learning and progress; how learners use their peers to verify their learning gains; and, perhaps, most important of all, the ways in which the acquisition of technical skills can be linked to real life application of these skills.
- Learners' perceptions of what constitute 'good practices' in all aspects of teaching and learning could contribute considerably to retention and achievement. Investigations might explore preferences in relation to mode and frequency of learning, the balance of group and individual learning activities, group size and composition, the use of ICT in learning, etc.
- The perceptions of learners on programmes in which literacy and numeracy is embedded in and/or a support service for other studies may produce different outcomes.

The project set out to develop a model for practitioners to carry out research with learners. Lessons were learned about what does not work but we also learned about the value of this research for the practitioners and their organisations as they developed new skills, became more reflective and analytical about the experiences and processes of teaching and learning and, in some cases, used their insights to create new and better systems in their institutions.

The establishment of the NRDCLN now provides an opportunity to support the development of all these areas of work: the research themes, the research methodologies and models for practitioner research. The ultimate challenge, though, is to create a culture in which practitioners and managers develop mechanisms that will enable them to listen regularly to learners and find ways to use their perspectives and experiences to take forward and strengthen teaching and learning policy and practice. A research project such as this can make a contribution to the development of that culture.

Appendix 1 The learning journey metaphor

The aims of this activity were:

- to support learners to prepare for research interviews
- to develop skills for critical reflection.

The learning journey sessions were developed as a creative approach to supporting learners to reflect on their learning and progress. The sessions aimed to stimulate learners to talk about the different aspects, stages and processes of their learning in terms of a physical journey.

Tutors worked from a skeleton session plan (below) and adapted this to suit the needs and interests of the groups they were working with.

Suggestions for tutors to use to introduce the learning journey session

The following ideas can be used as a starting point. Tutors choose examples that resonate with their group and encourage them to get involved by suggesting additions to the metaphors as they develop.

- Setting out on a learning pathway has similarities with embarking on a journey or a series of journeys. You start from somewhere and you have a destination in mind.
- You make choices about how to get there and the way you travel. You often talk to others to help you do this, for example family member, friend, ticket office staff or travel agent.
- Different methods will be suitable for different types of journey and the choice will also be influenced by factors such as convenience and cost. You also choose your routes and may decide to go for a fast track, for example a motorway or aeroplane, or you select a slower, scenic route with interesting diversions and breaks along the way.
- Things do not always go to plan and you may arrive sooner than expected. You may have to give up the journey or you may be slowed down or delayed by things often outside your control, for example leaves on the line or traffic jams. Sometimes you have to abandon your journey, for example because trains are cancelled or the car breaks down.
- Your travelling companions are also important. You may go with friends, make friends along the way or travel in solitude. The tour leader or guide has a crucial role and can make a trip into a success, for example by making the journey interesting and by encouraging members of the group to get to know

each other. They can also spoil the journey, for example by taking you on a tedious, slow route or getting lost.

- You usually like to know where you are on the route, how far you have travelled, how far you have to go and how near you are to your destination. You may do this by checking the time, or recognising landmarks or asking other people how you are getting on with the journey. Some people keep a record of their journey, for example by keeping the tickets or writing a diary.
- Sometimes you change your mind about where you want to go. You may be enjoying the journey and want to travel further than originally planned; you may change your route or select a different journey.
- The journey may also have affected you in ways you didn't anticipate and you may have discovered new and unexpected things along the way.

Materials

Tutors developed the following materials to support the session:

- maps to prompt learners to think about their journeys in relation to features of the map such as destinations, landmarks and distances
- a PowerPoint presentation to introduce the topic
- timelines to support learners to see how far they had travelled, how far they still had to go and what had impacted on their learning at different stages
- photographs or cue cards with pictures of buildings, plans, people, landscapes, etc, to stimulate discussion.

Outline learning journey session

The following session outline was used a starting point for planning the sessions. Activities were organised in pairs, small groups or the full group depending on the size of the group, time available and the profile of the learners.

Session guide

1. **Introduce the idea of learning as a journey to the group of learners by**: • explaining the idea and drawing comparisons with the conventional idea of a journey as travelling from one geographical location to another. Use a visual aid (eg a map) to demonstrate points and invite learners to contribute to the metaphor • describing one of your own learning journeys in terms of the metaphor using visuals such as photographs or a timeline.
2. **Ask learners to talk about different types of journeys they have made.** This may include where they went, why they chose that destination, their mode of transport and the type of route they selected.
3. **When you have elicited a range of examples ask learners to relate them to their learning journeys**. For example, if someone described a motorway journey ask if anyone's learning journey is a motorway journey. Encourage them to expand on this, for example to say where they were going, why they chose to travel by car and the motorway route, etc. Ask other members of the group about different types of learning journeys. Encourage learners to discuss and compare their journeys.
4. **Ask learners how they know how far they have travelled on a journey.** Use learners' suggestions to ask how they know how far they have progressed on their learning journey. For example, if arriving at a station was one of their examples, ask how they know they have reached a station on their learning journey. Encourage them to explore and share ideas and experiences and reflect on their satisfaction with their progress, for example is it the right speed?
5. **Discuss obstacles that slow down or stop a journey.** Encourage learners to discuss their learning obstacles. For example, ask what are their 'leaves on the line'. What obstacles they have faced, how have they dealt with them, any support they may have had and their views and feelings about this?
6. **Ask learners to discuss how they feel about different journeys they have made.** Were the journeys worth making and why? Did they enjoy them or not and why? Discuss their contributions in relation to their learning journeys.
7. **Ask about changes they have made on journeys.** Have they gone somewhere different, have they extended a journey, have they been inspired by something that happened or something they saw on a journey and decided to go further? Ask them to relate these examples to their current journey and future plans.

Appendix 2 Interview framework

Question prompts

Researchers refer to the journey metaphor and in each area probe to elicit detailed information and reflective and evaluative comments.

Before starting

Check that the interviewee:

- is comfortable
- knows how long the interview will last
- understands the purpose of the interview and the areas it will cover
- understands that what they say will be confidential
- agrees that the interview can be recorded.

The interview

Cover the following areas. Think about the questions you may ask before you start the interview:

- aims/aspirations/purpose(s) of starting their learning journey
- planning the learning journey
- distance travelled
- ways of knowing
- recording progress
- satisfaction with the journey.

At the end

Thank learners for taking part in the study.

Stress the value and importance of what they have said.

Appendix 3 Research team

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Appendix 4 Membership of the steering group

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Members

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David Barton	University of Lancaster
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Stephen Burniston	York Consulting
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Mary Hamilton	University of Lancaster
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Appendix 5 Learning and Skills Research Networks

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